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PLANET stories

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SIXTY-YEAR EXTENSION

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for the stars.

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Alan E. Nourse

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THE LOST TRIBES of VENUS Novellet by
Erik Fennel

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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 6

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

MAY, 1954

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Down where the gripes begin.

I. T. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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THE VIZIGRAPH

To turn bottom side up for a change, here are the letter champions and picture winners for the March issue: 1) Carol McKinney; 2) Frederick B. Christoff; 3) Ron Ellik.

And speaking of pictures, several writers have complained recently that they are often unable to identify the artists' bylines on the illustrations. Beginning with the July number we intend setting down this information in clear readable type on the same page with the illustration. For this issue I'll use this space to link artist and author. Here goes: Vestal—Goldstein; Freas—Groves, Fennel; Emshwiller—Dick, Nourse; Eberle—Wesley, McKimney, Jr.

And so on to the letters; the load is heavier than usual this trip.

RATING 'EM ALL

Grove School
Madison, Conn.

Greetings:

Noble sire, you outdid yourself with the January issuance. The fiction was the most and the letter column was its usual self: An integration of mature expostulation and good clean fun. Now, take it from the top. . . .

What you don't know is that your editorial comments that graced the first paragraphs of La Vizi form the best argument I can put forth in reference to a feature on the fan press. Ree's article is the first big fan effort to draw your comment. What about the legion others that transpire each month? A West Coast contingent working out a Pool for budding amateur authors . . . a veritable proving ground for the Bracketts and the Bradburys of the years hence. Digressions on subjects of not only fannish interest but matters that would provoke attention from any reader of science-fiction. Fiction that is perhaps of a quality not unlike that of the professional field, but is fortunate enough to lack the components of popular reading. With the latter load off my phlegmatic chest, I go . . . on to the next topic.

More than half of the material in this issue rates a firm congratulatory handshake; really the mostest. Brackett—though it was not a novelet, as stated—together with Stearns, Dick, Junior, and Holden attain the highest ratings in my book. The only intolerable efforts were the unmentionable brevity by Stearns (?) under a fig leaf and the crumbier of two real novelets by Jan Smith. (The other real novelet was Fox Holden's.) Bradbury doesn't get rated as the effort of his that appeared here was a reprint. Its merit is noted in the fact COLLIERS deigned to print it in the Summer of 1952 and that magazine is the easiest market for science-fiction. On rereading the story, I found that it was as enjoyable as it was in its initial appearance.

I still wonder why you don't announce forthcoming works. This might build up some interest in your magazine that isn't there now. Because, when a pulp comes out in this town, it is delegated to one

of the more obscure positions in the magazine display. Thusly, if the reader isn't in constant contact with the newsstand, he misses the current issue. And don't tell me that doesn't occur!

To La Vizi . . . Our sights fall on a lowly invertebrate-type fan by the name of John Truax. Could it be that Truax is the Hyde to my Jackal—Oops.—? This letter has the earmarks of being an early Beer-missive. So that's what Sam Mines does with his leftovers.

Mittelbuscher seems to have fallen into a trance. Leave him there. The inane spurtings emanated from that stomach-weakening pen were too much for me. The saccharine phrasings seeped into my pores and I . . . I ran up the hall.

J. D. Clark does well by himself this trip. His opinions exemplify some of the maturity in the column this time. His unsuredness is shown when he states in reference to Psychology, "I consider the latter a science even though learned men do not."

Frankly, his leamedness and intelligence is in a niche above the usual correspondent appearing in your pages. As to the matter of which he otherwise writes, sex has been so integrated in the American culture as something to be whispered about that it will take a hell of a lot more than controversial literature and intelligent voicings from the genre like Mr. Clark's to dispel the schizoid state of mind which has formed an ideological cyst around all things sexual. Until then we should laud the Clarks as being minor league de Beauvriors. I wouldn't compare him with Kinsey, as Kinsey became popular and was destroyed.

Carol McKinney should throw in the towel in respect to the poll idea. What she'll attain is a mass of subjective scratchings and I'll have achieved very little. A broader plan that would encompass an objective summation of each magazine's relative merits might prove beneficial to all concerned.

Christoff there in all his glory,
Maturity is another story.

He speaks of screwball supremacy
He wears this crown so easily.

This is a poem in heroic couplets
Yet suggests poison to me and not in droplets.

The defense rests.

Now as the sun fades off the TV set, I go. . .

Yours until Keogh dries up,

BURTON K. BEERMAN

ATTENTION, ABUF!

Hingham,
Mass.

Say Jack,

I like PLANET STORIES, I like science fiction, I like Ray Bradbury and someday I hope to read his "Sensational" (that's from the cover of your November ish) "The Golden Apples of the Sun." That is one of the reasons I picked your last mag. I got to the place I was residing at the time and set down to an hour's enjoyable reading. HIGHWAY J was very good until about the 16th page then something happened. I ask you, who is the blundering idiot who doesn't know TWO WESTERN-ACTION BOOKS from PLANET STORIES? As a result, three of your selections were interrupted.

Now science-fiction is science-fiction, and ADIOS RANGE just doesn't fit my requirements for science-fiction. I was thoroughly irritated and swore a blue streak back to the store. I yelled, I shouted, and tore my hair. The storekeeper was very calm about the

whole thing and in his typical Vermont style he replied, "It ain't my fault!"

Don't blow a gasket yet, Jack, I bought your January issue and I will probably buy another one. All I want to know is, "Where in the universe can I get a good copy of your November issue."

You don't know me, I don't know you. Let's keep it that way, someday I'll let you in on a little secret.

Regretfully yours,

ABUF*

*That's my interpretation of A Burned Up Fan.

Ed's note: Unsigned letters usually find quick passage to the wastebasket. This is an exception, for I would very much like to forward you a correct copy of our November issue since the one you purchased was misbought—an error that occasionally occurs at our bindery plant. So, ABUF, please send me your name and address.

3 CHEERS FOR THE CARDBOARD HERO

2444 Valley Street
Berkeley 2, Calif.

Dear Jack,

I am writing this letter for one reason: to let you know that I think if you changed PLANET it would be the worst thing that could possibly happen to the grand old mag. It has survived about 14 years of publishing the way it is, and I think will survive another 14 in the same manner.

I think that TOPS IN SCIENCE FICTION has a good format and such, and it features good material, even if it is reprinted from PLANET. (Not that PLANET does not contain good material, you understand!) But if you changed PLANET to that type of format, it would lose the thing that sells most of the copies. It would lose the atmosphere of good old sci. The days of pure space opera, the days when the hero was nothing but a cardboard cut-out, and the villain had a long black mustache. The action was fast, and the plot carried the characters over the vast realm of the Universe, outward to Vega and Rymlo, past the decaying Union and then, back to Terra.

PLANET is the only magazine on the stands that still publishes the space opera story in every issue. The stories are as erudy as they can be, although a real gem pops up once in a while. But we'd still buy PLANET if it had stories written by two-year olds, and we all know that. If PLANET had to rely on the quality of her stories, she would have been out of business a long time ago. The stories are at least readable, and they still have the cardboard hero dashing madly about. The villain is still there, and he hasn't shaved his mustache off. We still blast off for alien ports, in search of the fair damsel. The BEM's crawl down our backs, but we still buy PLANET. And that, Jack, is the important thing.

The January issue was good, by the standards I have just named. I LIKED IT. Space opera is my meat, and I don't intend to become a vegetarian while PLANET is still around and kicking.

A SOUND OF THUNDER was the best in the issue, but I can't see rating this above MARS MINUS BISHA, because the former was a reprint. The only story I particularly didn't like was GEORGE LOVES GISTLA. No more, please!!!

Ah fame, my lewer was in LA VIZI. But I will not rate my letter best because . . . well . . . I . . . you see. . . First place goes to J. Dean Clark. Second goes to Joe Keogh, just because he wants more readers columns. Last is Mittelbuscher's request for more columns.

(Continued on page 107)

SIXTY-YEAR EXTENSION

By ALAN E. NOURSE

They told only half the story to Daniel Carter Griffin when he volunteered to die. They told him of the glories of life re-born; youth re-captured; love re-won; of Free Agenting around the cosmos. Of many things, they spoke about . . . but never once did they mention the lurid second death.

IT OCCURRED to Griffin as he sat waiting in the office that he had forgotten what day it was.

It was a silly thing, and it upset him all

out of proportion to its importance. At first it had been no more than a disturbing flicker in the back of his mind, an uneasy half-thought, not even consciously formed. He





had been waiting for Cranstead for a quarter of an hour, and he hadn't been thinking very coherently about much of anything. His right arm was still a bit sore, but mostly he was aware of a curious feeling of strength and exhilaration as he eyed the cool gray walls of the office. But something bothered him, nibbling away deep in his mind; he crossed and uncrossed his legs, feeling a trifle impatient. And then, with a shiver, he realized that he didn't even know what the date was!

He pulled out his wallet with a frown, and searched for the pocket calendar he carried. He glanced at it, and then put it back with a grunt. It didn't help him a bit. He didn't even know what month it was, or even year, for sure. He leaned back, trying to remember what day it was; and his mind was abruptly flooded with the implications of the staggering thing he had done—

That they had done—

He stood up and threw open the door into the reception room. A girl sat typing at the desk. She typed on for a moment, then paused and looked up.

"How soon will he be ready?" Griffin asked, trying hard to keep the panic out of his voice.

The girl smiled professionally. "I'm sorry, Mr. Griffin. He won't keep you waiting long. Can I get you something to read?"

He shook his head. "No—I'll just wait. I'll tell you what you can do, though. You can tell me what date it is." Suddenly he felt very foolish.

"Certainly. This is the seventeenth of July."

He nodded, feeling slightly numb as he returned to his seat. The seventeenth of July! It had been December when he had come here. Or had it been a year ago last December. Or ten years ago? He couldn't remember. His broad forehead wrinkled into a frown as he tried to think. They had told him that his memory would be somewhat incoherent over the period that he was there, but he hadn't realized how helpless he would feel to have eight months of his life suddenly reduced to a jumbled series of unconnected events. And how could he straighten them out? He shook his head, the chill deepening in his chest. Maybe they never would be straightened out—

He stared at himself in the mirror that

hung on the wall, more in the spirit of appraisal than curiosity. That first shock of looking at himself was behind him now; not that he could ever forget it as long as he lived, but he was no longer jolted by the face that peered out at him from the mirror, the short dark hair without trace of gray, the broad forehead, the heavy face—not a bad face, really, a curious, young-old face that looked like that of a twenty-year-old until one examined it closely, and then utterly defied age-identification with an infuriating complacency. His face, beyond doubt, but not the face he had seen in the mirror eight months ago. More like the face that had looked out at him from the mirror some thirty years before.

THE office door banged open, and a tall, gray-haired man walked in, dropping a pile of papers on the desk. "Hello, Griff! Sorry to keep you waiting. Never can tell when you'll get stalled in a place like this." John Cranstead dropped easily into his chair behind the desk and eyed Griffin quizzically. "Feeling excited? Or just scared out of your shirt?"

"A little of both," said Griffin, uneasily. "I don't know quite how I feel."

Cranstead grinned, and popped his glasses out of his pocket. "Ah, well. Don't worry about it. Martha says you wondered what day it was."

Griffin flushed. "I couldn't remember it."

"You'd have been remarkable if you could," Cranstead chuckled. "It went pretty well with you. Eight months is almost dead minimum for a complete job. But then they told me you cooperated very well."

Griffin shrugged. "Naturally."

"Well, it's over now. As of—" he peered at his wrist watch for an instant, then jotted the time down on the top sheet of paper—"3:15 P.M., 17 July, 2173, I can no longer call you Dan Griffin. You're a Free Agent now. Or you will be." He picked up the paper, glanced at it, and handed it across the desk to Griffin. "Don't let it throw you," he said.

Griffin glanced down at the paper, with a terrifying feeling of unreality, as if this were all part of a very bad dream. They had told him, of course. They had explained it all very carefully. But then, they had told

him so many things. At the top of the paper he saw the Hoffman Medical Center seal, and just below it, in heavy Gothic letters, he read:

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

His eyes ran down the page to his own name. Daniel Carter Griffin, male, aged 53. Cause of death: Subtotal Prosthesis, Voluntary. And below that, somewhere near the bottom, a line marked "signature."

Griffin looked up at Cranstead's smiling face. "I'm supposed to sign this?"

"That's right. There are a few other forms to sign—legal claims papers for the Metropolitan Death Insurance Company, a few other customary papers—" He broke off with a smile. "Don't look so horrified. It's really not as paradoxical as it seems. After all, Dan Griffin *is* quite dead. You'll certainly agree to that."

Griffin nodded, signing the papers rapidly. "When do I get my name back?"

"At the end of your Free Agent period, if you want it back. Or any other name you choose. That's up to you." Cranstead smiled. "And of course, as a Free Agent you can use any name you like."

"I can't see what's wrong with the old one. I was quite happy with it."

Cranstead shrugged. "You may find yourself quite a different man now."

"Well, I don't feel any different." Griffin's voice had a sharp defensive edge, and his eyes were suddenly bright with anger. "I feel fine; just the same as I always felt. Why all this ridiculous rigmarole?"

Cranstead sighed. "Take it easy, Griff. How do you know how you feel? You haven't been outside the hospital walls since the prosthesis started. You haven't met anyone or reacted to anything other than carefully controlled hospital conditions. Don't be impatient. You don't know yet what you'll want because you're literally a new man. You've turned in your old worn out body for a new one. Give it a try before you get excited."

Griffin scowled. "But why this insinuation that things will be different? I remember my old life perfectly well. I liked it. I want to go back. Why make it so difficult?"

Cranstead tossed him a cigarette. "Look

at it this way," he said. "If you hadn't come here to the Center for prosthesis, in about five years, give or take a little, that death certificate would have been valid in a very, very final sense. You'd have been gone and there'd have been no bringing you back. But you did come here to the Center, under your own steam, and submitted to a very thorough repair job; a repair job that will last you another sixty to eighty years, starting now—"

"All right, I know that," snapped Griffin. "I still don't see—"

Cranstead held up his hand. "Wait a minute—you don't quite realize that you may indeed be very dead to the world you knew before. The doctors can't predict the personality changes you may have undergone. Except for certain very broad limits, they can't predict how you'll act. So we have to protect you, as well as the world you left when you came here. The prosthesis is almost a total job—replaced organs, replaced vascular system, replaced glandular system, even some repaired nervous tissue. Some men come out almost exactly as they were before. But some come out vastly different—"

Griffin blinked and stared at the death certificate. "And this," he said slowly, "protects me."

"It makes the old Dan Griffin with the leaky heart and the bad kidneys legally dead. Just as the death insurance protects your wife and family. You can't be forced back into the old mold if you don't fit, so you're cut loose as completely as possible. You have a year to adjust; a year as a Free Agent, to go anywhere you wish and do anything you like. You no longer exist in the eyes of the law. If you go back to your old life, that's fine. And if you don't go back, and find yourself a new life, that's fine too. It's up to you."

Dan Griffin stood up, a coldness growing in his mind like nothing he had ever experienced; a sense of utter aloneness and total helplessness. "It's hard to get used to," he said softly. "I don't know what to think." He walked to the window and stared out at the city that spread out for miles, and saw the shadows of the tall Upper Level apartments falling across the busy curves of the throughways. "I just don't know—"

"We'll help you in any way we can," said Cranstead. "But nobody but yourself can influence your ultimate decision. You're a Free Agent. The decision must be yours."

"It's frightening," said Griffin.

John Cranstead gave him a long look. "It may be the most frightening thing in the world," he said.

CHAPTER II

HE DID not go home immediately. He wasn't entirely sure why he didn't. He knew that he wanted to go home more than anything else. To go back to the house he had known for so long, back to the soft comfort of the old, heavy, carved furniture, back to the rows of books, and the neat paintings on the walls. And back to Marian, who would be waiting there for him. Oh, he wanted to go back, but somehow something held him, some cold, unreasoning core of apprehension that lay in his mind, whispering in his ear as he walked down the steps of the Hoffman Medical Center into the crush of traffic on the street below. His wrist still tingled from the needles that had stamped the small green bar there, indelibly. The mark was his passport, and he shivered as his mind echoed Cranstead's words back in the office. "You're free in every sense of the word. Go wherever you like, do anything you want to do. Deliberate criminality won't occur to you, and you'll be incapable of it if it does. We've seen to that. But otherwise, the ultimate decision is up to you—"

A cab skidded by and he hailed it. He settled back in the seat as the little car swept up into the heavy elevated traffic that moved down through the miles of curves and straightways into the center of the City. It was huge, this beehive that had spread down from Boston and up from Washington to engulf the entire Atlantic Seaboard, a place where he could lose himself for a little while, and maybe think things through before he went back to his home and to Marian. He stared from the window at the bright lights below—the Lower Level commercial traffic, speeding with its never-ending hum—the tattered sections of the Old City that lay below, half-hidden ruins of an age that few men could remember, or would want to remem-

ber if they could. The driver's voice broke in on his reverie, and he gave a little start.

"I said, where you goin', Mister?"

"Oh. Anywhere. I don't care." He hesitated for a moment. "I'm a Free Agent."

The driver nodded. "Mind if I pick up fares?"

"Not in the least." Griffin shrugged himself back in the seat, staring out the window. Frightening, he'd said! It was paralyzing. He moved his arms, first one, then the other, feeling the remnants of the painful tightness under the smoothly-molded skin. Then his mind drifted back, and he tried to remember the days of sickness, trying to visualize physically how it had felt to be sick. He found that he couldn't remember. He was no longer sick, and the pain and fright and desperation were unpleasant memories, the first to be dulled, and hidden from sight, and larded over with the frosting of forgetfulness.

And yet he knew that he had been sick. He had been older then, just past fifty, and though he could not recreate those days in his mind, he knew that he had known he was sick for a long time, a growing awareness that health and youngness had somehow been left behind. There had been the gasping rests at the top of the stairs while he had waited for breath and energy to return; and the leaden tiredness at the end of the day that had made the evenings a gauntlet to be endured. And there had been those terrifying nights when he had awakened in a cold sweat, strangling in the darkness, with hardly the strength left to drag himself up into a sitting position; and then Marian, wide-eyed with fright, barely able to hold back the tears, packing pillows behind him as he sat gasping by the open window, wondering if this really might be the end. And then, later, the stabbing, excruciating pain that cut through his chest and down his arm, the vice-like wrenching pain that tore the breath from him, and almost life itself. Angina, the doctor had called it. Congestive failure. And he had sat there, by the window, and known that he was staring death in the face.

The pain he could not remember now, but the fear was sharp in his memory. And then there had been the day when old Doctor Barnez had come in to see him, and

settled back in the chair, smiling at him, and said, "Griff, I think it's time you considered a repair job. A real repair job. Because you won't be with us long if you don't—"

He had grasped at it with the desperation that can be born only of staring death in the face, grasped at it as he stood literally in the valley of shadows. Oh, he had heard of prosthesis. He could even remember the bitter political battles that had raged. He could remember the attacks on it from the pulpit, and the rabble-rousing speeches of the men who used it as a football to carry them to power. But the laws were passed in spite of them, and many people had taken the step. And always Griffin had watched with desultory interest, and thought it a thing of the remote future, never applicable to a strong, active man like himself.

He stared out at the buildings, tall and proud in the gathering darkness. When the chips were finally down, he had agreed, Life was sweet. If it was within the power of medical techniques to restore it, could he scorn such a chance? Could anyone? For after all, it was the goal of hundreds of years of medical study. Gradually, over the years, medicine had leaped the low hurdles of disease, of microbes, and viruses, and creeping malignancies, and these had been the easy steps. At the end, they had moved against the real last enemies of man: old age, degeneration, the multitude of death's helpers which had held man to a hundred years of life. And then those hurdles had been crossed—

Griffin shook his head as the cab took another turn and sped deeper into the city. He had wanted a healthy body again. And they had promised him a healthy body. The prosthesis was almost total, the remodelling he could never have understood, the probing and repairing, the replacing and regrowing and relearning. And he had come forth with a healthy body, with his past life's full measure of memory and experience, and another sixty years in which to use it. He had thought that a healthy, whole body once more was all he could ever desire—

And now he wondered.

HE KNEW now that he was going to see Dr. Barnez first, before he went any-

where else. He leaned over and gave the driver the address, and then settled back, waiting as the car reached the upper-level strips of the New City. He found the doctor's house, and waited in the small ante-room for a few moments. Then he saw the familiar, stooped figure, beaming at him from the door of the inner office. "Come in, Griff, come in!" he boomed. "Lord, man, what a change! You look like you never looked before. They treated you well over there—" The old doctor tossed him a cigar, and settled back, regarding him over silver-rimmed glasses. "Any regret, Griff? Even cigars you can have again now!"

Griffin shook his head, feeling the uneasiness nibbling again at his mind. "No—no regrets, nothing I can put my finger on—" He nipped the cigar, feeling suddenly foolish to take such relish in contemplating the acrid smoke of a dried-up weed.

"But a multitude of things you can't quite put your finger on, eh?" The old man was smiling.

Griffin nodded slowly.

"You'll find the readjustment troublesome at times. But as a Free Agent, it's infinitely easier." The old man paused. "You've seen Marian?"

Griffin flushed. "No. I haven't been home. I'm—I'm a little afraid to go."

"Don't be. Marian will be there."

"Oh, I don't mean that. It's just—I've been waiting so long, and hoping so much. I don't know what to expect of Marian, I'm afraid she'll be different, somehow—"

"She won't be changed."

Griffin's eyes caught the old man's. "I know it. But what about me? I don't feel any different—"

Dr. Barnez held up a wrinkled, blue-veined hand. "It's to be expected, isn't it? You're not the same man you were. Your mind is intact, but there are many more things that make a man what he is than his mind, Griff. You've been changed in many ways—physical changes, chemical changes, endocrine changes. That's why you're a Free Agent. They've learned the hard way that they can't force the new form into the old mold. It just didn't work."

Griffin sat forward, his eyes burning on the old man's face. "What's happened to the others, doctor? I want it straight."

Doctor Barnez shook his head. "Why torture yourself, Griff? Go home to Marian, see how you feel—"

"I want it straight."

The doctor shrugged. "All right. Some have gone back and stayed. But many haven't stayed. A great many."

"Where have they gone?"

"Who knows? They're dead as far as the world they left is concerned. Who knows where they've gone?"

"But I don't want to change! Can't you see that? I love Marian. She's been my life. For years she's been more to me than anything else. I wouldn't change that for life itself—"

The old doctor stood up, shaking his head. "You mustn't worry," he said gently. "Ultimately, the choice is yours. It will be you who stays, or leaves, in the end. Not Marian."

HE OPENED the door of his house, and walked in, and found himself face to face with a total stranger.

She looked the same, of course. The same dark, beautiful eyes, the same finely molded face, the same tiny figure, kept amazingly slender and youthful over the years. Her hair was graying more than he had remembered, but it was the same Marian he had left, eight months before. And yet, he knew the moment that he saw her that something was gone, and could never be replaced, not in a thousand years of life.

Her lips trembled as she searched his face, and she said, "I'm glad you're back, Griff—" and he walked into the room like a ghost, moving about as though he were not really here at all, but seeing things in a strange, subtly distorted dream. The desk, with its perpetual litter just as he had left it; the honey barrel full of pipes, charred and scratched from years of use, still slightly fragrant from the last smoking. And there were the soft chairs, the worn carpet, the pictures on the walls. The same, fine, smooth architectural lines that had pleased him so when the house was built five years before; scientifically fitted to their personalities in a thousand subtle ways, as any house should be. He sat down gingerly, as though expecting to fall through into the dust beneath the house, and looked again at Marian,

his lovely, wonderful Marian—for the house which had fit so well was a nightmare to his sensibilities now, garish and impossible—and a Marian he didn't know was waiting eagerly for him to speak.

And then he knew it was only a dream, his memories of the life before. He waited for the surge of excitement, waited for the eager words to come into his throat, the words telling her how very much he had missed her, what plans he had made for them—and his throat was dry, and no words came. He waited for the joy of returning to sweep through him, and it did not come. It was dead, as dead as the ashes in that last-smoked pipe.

He didn't say a word. He didn't have to, because he saw it in her eyes, wide heart-broken eyes. He looked at her, and all he felt was pity. He didn't even feel shame, though he felt he should. And he knew that words would only make it harder, would be whiplashes to make the wounds deeper and more vicious.

He picked up his hat, and brushed her cheek with his lips, and without a word he walked out through the door.

Marian had not changed, not in any way. The house was the same, kept in readiness, waiting for him. No, Marian hadn't changed.

It was he who had changed.

III

AT FIRST he felt only anger. The suspicion didn't come until later. It was a cold, amorphous anger, not directed toward anyone or anything, a wrenching, nonspecific sort of anger. He found a small place where he could eat, set down off the Upper Level thoroughway, and he ordered hot coffee and a little food, and then sank his head into his hands—

And the anger grew, as he thought of the horrible house that no longer fit, and of Marian, and himself with the strange young-old face that was not his face at all, but a ghost-face from the past that stared out of the mirror at him. They had warned him, of course. Told him, rather. It had not been a warning, for warning implies evil, and if there had been evil in what they had told him it had been well con-

cealed. They had said that everything would be as he left it, that he could go back to his old life, if that was what he wanted, if that was where he belonged. They had told him all this, and it had had little meaning to him.

But it had meaning now, a thousand meanings that he could not understand. Because he had gone back, and discovered in the horror of a single look that it was wrong, that he no longer belonged. And it was then that he began to suspect that somehow, beyond his control and ken, he had become the victim of a terrible, cosmic joke.

Yet he was alive. He could not deny it. There was nothing wrong with his mind. He could think, he could remember, analyze. Just as they said, he could go back to the desk where he had worked so many years, and take over once again where he had left off.

But the place had repelled him. He shivered, and the suspicion deepened. They had said he could go back, if he wanted to, but he didn't want to. He couldn't even make a pretense of wanting to. There were other things to do, somewhere, more important things that had no part nor connection with the old Dan Griffin.

People were coming into the place now. They sat at tables nearby, and he could feel their eyes drift over him, curiously. How many times before had he watched these strange, drifting creatures with faces that belied their years, when they had chanced to cross his path? How often, before, had he seen the little green bar tattooed on a wrist, and looked at the face above it, and wondered, what is he doing? How does it feel to be a completely new man again, with a new life, and twelve months of freedom, complete freedom of movement, of inquiry, of thought. He wished that he had never wondered these things before.

The coffee came and he gulped it eagerly, realizing that he hadn't eaten for several hours. The suspicion was taking form in his mind now, and he grasped at it greedily. He had seen many Free Agents before. They had become an accepted, harmless facet of a society rather too hurried to be bothered much by introspection. Free Agents? They were—well, they were

around. They didn't do any harm, the news articles had said that only psychologically safe people were accepted for prosthesis, and then they were conditioned against criminal activities in the course of the remodelling. Why worry about them? They were seen here and there, and they bothered no one, and no one bothered them.

But what happened to them? Some went back to their old lives. He knew that. Some came back and took up their old places as if they had merely taken a vacation trip. And others came back, and then left—

Where did they go?

Griffin tried to think. Specifically, whom did he know who had come back permanently?

He ran over names in his mind. Jack Townsend—he'd come back. Fine boy, Jack, and never a whisper of a change. Ted Maroneck? He'd bolted after two weeks back, and Griffin had run into him in the city one day, with a coarse blonde woman, slightly drunk, and very raucous. How about Phil Steinberg? Only a week at home. Couldn't blame him, though. Ellie had been enough to drive anybody back to the woods. They'd never heard from him since. And Bob Whittaker—he'd been gone six months, now. And Joe Meyer—where was Joe?

Griffin took up his coat, preparing to leave, and now suddenly he was afraid. There was something wrong. In his own acquaintance, a couple who had come home and stayed. And a dozen who were gone, like the month of May.

Where?

He wanted to know. And something screamed in his mind that he had better find out where they had gone. And very soon.

THE building said Bureau of Public Records on the facade, and he walked up the marble steps quickly, his mind now hard with suspicion. In the center of the huge lobby he found the Directory, and read down the lines of names and departments. Under R he found "Reading Room, Microfilm Library," with a floor number after it. A few moments later he was stepping off the elevator, walking into the long, narrow room with the reading booths

glassed in against the walls. He found a place, and lifted the order-phone from its hook. "Let me have the documentary file on Robert L. Whittaker of this city," he said.

"I'm sorry, sir." The operator's voice was harsh in his ear. "Personal files are not available without proper authorization—"

"I'm a Free Agent," said Griffin shortly. "I'd like to see that file."

The visiphone screen came to light quite suddenly, and the girl's face appeared. "Identification, please?"

He held up a card from his pocket. There was no name on it. It carried a tri-di photo-impression, and a fingerprint, and said FREE AGENT in large green letters, followed by a code number. The girl watched him stamp his thumb on a duplicator card, and then the screen snapped off. Then, seconds later, a microfilm spool plopped down in the groove before him.

He took it out and threaded it into the reader, his heart pounding wildly in his throat. "Send me the same on Philip C. Steinberg and Joseph B. Meyer," he said. "And any other information you have on their activities—"

The documents were there, of course. Birth certificate, baptismal record, licensing record, application for prosthesis, application approval. He blinked at the last frame on the spool, a chill going down his back.

The death certificate. With Bob Whittaker's signature on it.

He snatched up the order phone again, his hand trembling. "I'd like Robert Whittaker's Free Agent records," he snapped at the operator's smooth voice.

There was a pause. Then the operator said, "There aren't any records, sir."

"WHAT?"

"I'm sorry, there is no record of Robert Whittaker reapplying for his name."

"Well then, what name did he take?"

"I'm sorry, that information is not available."

"I told you I'm a Free Agent."

"I'm sorry. Free Agent records are not available to anyone. Not even Free Agents."

It was the chink in the wall that he had known he would find. He slammed down the receiver with a crash, and threaded the second spool. It had been too good, too

smooth for it to be true. He had known, deep in his mind, that somewhere he would find the flaw in the Free Agent's freedom—and he had found it. And knowing where the flaw was only fed his suspicions and fanned his fears into brighter flame.

It was the same with every spool. Phil Steinberg was legally dead. Sorry, but information regarding his Free Agent period is restricted. Ted Maroneck was legally dead. So was Joe Meyer—

So was Dan Griffin—

He sat there trembling, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. He had known there would be a flaw. He wasn't supposed to know it. A marionette wasn't supposed to know that it was only a creature on a string, a lifeless piece of wood until hands drew the strings and made it do its little dance of life. Like the monkey-on-a-stick he had owned as a boy, so many years before, which would climb up, and down, and up, and down, every time he pressed the button.

And somewhere, he had a button now. And somewhere, somebody was pushing it. Something had happened to him quite apart from the physical rebuilding. Neatly hidden behind a careful screen of helpfulness and humanity and a brave new life was something else, something that he had not been told. And he was being manipulated, like a monkey on a stick, and he couldn't do anything about it, because he wouldn't know about it.

But now he did know.

IV

SOMEWHERE to the west of the city a Mars-bound rocket rose on its fiery tail with a roar, higher and higher on its wings of flame until its roar had dwindled to a high, penetrating whine. It flickered in the morning sun, and disappeared.

Griffin awoke with a jolt, and stared out the window of the hotel, watching the rocket move like an arrow across the sky, a sight that he had always loved. Then he rolled back with a groan, the anger and fear of the night before rushing back into his sleep-dulled mind like a nightmare.

He had not found them. When he had

finally taken the room, and fallen down fully clothed on the bed to sleep, he knew he had reached a dead end. He could do nothing but wait now. And knowing what he knew, he was afraid to wait.

And then he heard a sound in the room, and jerked upright, and saw the girl standing in the door. She was watching him as he lay there, her face without expression. She might have been pretty once; her hair had been long and shining black, and there was even a trace of a wave left in it, a pitiful attempt to pin it back in some semblance of order. But her face was hard, and she watched him with sharp dark eyes like an animal's.

He sat up slowly, his feet on the cold floor. "All right," he said. "What do you want? How did you get in here?"

Her lips curled into a sneer. "You can go where you want to. Why can't I?"

His eyes drifted to her wrist. It was blank. "Who are you?"

"You don't recognize me? With all the slinking around and watching through the corner of your eye, you haven't even seen me before?" She sank down in a chair, regarding him as if he were some sort of bug. "I spotted you up in the restaurant last night. I've been following you ever since. You didn't know that?"

He was on his feet now, a snarl of anger in his throat. He started across the room for the telephone, and she said, "You'd better leave that alone."

"I'm going to call the police."

"The police won't help you. You're dead, remember? Or was it somebody else's records you were looking up last night?"

He whirled on her, his eyes blazing. "Get out of here," he said, "before I throw you out."

The girl's face was contemptuous. "Sit down, buddy," she said. "You Retreads really think you're God Almighty, don't you? Walk out all shiny and new, and you think you own the world, with your pretty Free Agent stripe and all the tripe that goes with it."

Comprehension began to seep through now. The girl's voice was bitter. Griffin sat down, watching the girl closely. "What have you got against Free Agents?"

"Plenty, buster."

"Like what, for instance?"

"Like the way the Hoffman Center sets itself up as judge and jury and makes a chosen people out of you. Not out of me. Oh, no, I won't stand a chance when the time comes. Not my old man, either. He tried for a retreat, and they turned him down flat. Psychopathic inferior, they called him. He had to die. I'll have to die, too. But sooner or later they're going to find something wrong with the setup, and when they do, all hell is going to break loose, and they'll cut it out altogether, just like they tried to do at the first, and then there won't be any more snakes like you walking around with your pretty green stripes. Just one thing's got to go wrong, that's all." Her face was bitter. "How does it feel to be the Lord Master, buster? What are you so scared of? Or hasn't it been all it cracked up to be?"

Griffin closed his eyes tiredly. "I think we'll get along better if you'll just state your business and get out. What do you want?"

"I want you, buddy."

"What do you know about me?" His eyes snapped open sharply.

She made a bored face. "Mister, I don't know you from Adam's off ox. All I know about you is the little green stripe on your arm."

"So I'm a Free Agent."

"That's all I need. A Free Agent. Any Free Agent will do."

He shook his head. "No dice. I don't get mixed up in any shady deals."

Quite suddenly the bitterness and contempt were gone from the girl's face, and only the fear remained, a craven, hopeless kind of fear. "There's nothing shady about it, Mister. Nothing bad, nothing you can't do, I swear it. Just going aboard a rocket ship for an inspection tour. Is there anything wrong with that? So you take a friend aboard with you. Then you walk off again. Is there anything wrong with that?"

Griffin blinked at her. There was no denying the desperation in her voice, the fear in her eyes. Griffin's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "What rocket are you talking about?"

"The Venus Rocket. It leave tonight. I want on board it."

"Why?"

"Maybe I like Venus. Maybe I don't like it here. Maybe I've got to get away. Take your choice."

"What about the Colonization Board?"

Her eyes were dark with fear. "They'd never let me aboard, I wouldn't dare apply. They'd find out—things—on my record here."

His mouth hardened. "You mean they'd turn you over."

"Well, maybe they would," she snarled. "What are you doing, playing cop or something? Look, I want on that rocket. I've got to get aboard it. You're a Free Agent. You can go wherever you like—and so can anyone who's with you, if you vouch for him. They can't touch you. And you're scared, you've been scared ever since you left the Records Bureau last night. It sticks out all over you—"

"All right, maybe I am!"

"Maybe you want something."

He turned on her sharply. Something in his mind was screaming a protest at the idea that was forming in his mind, but he shrugged it off. So maybe it was illegal, maybe even criminal—was that they had done to him any less criminal? "I want records," he said softly. "I want information and records. I want them very much."

"I can get them for you."

"The records I want are restricted."

"Do tell."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if they're on paper they can be bought."

"I have no money."

"Well, I have." She looked up at him sharply. "I've got enough money to buy passage to Venus. It can buy information if I can get free passage to Venus. It can buy information like nothing."

He sat down, his face very close to hers. "I want to know what's happened to other Free Agents," he said. "I can give you some names. I want their records, everything that's known about them, where they've gone, where they are now. I want them in a hurry."

The girl stared at him for a long minute. "You are scared," she said. She lit a cigarette, and tossed the match on the floor. "Let's get moving," she said.

SHE said her name was Nan Baker, and that was about all she would say. Griffin doubted even that, but he didn't press conversation as they left the surface car at the Lower Level junction, and moved down the roads and alleys into the depths of the Old City. The itinerary itself was more illuminating than any words; her very familiarity with their route offered more lethal insight into the girl's background and motives and trustworthiness than anything she could possibly have told him. She knew her way through this jungle of crowded, dilapidated buildings; without hesitation they threaded their way through a bewildering tangle of dirty streets and darkened alleys.

Some of the buildings were in ruins, but many still showed signs of dismal habitation. This was the Old City, the area of decay and violence and crime where no one in his right mind would think of going, or allow himself to be taken. It was the crumbling ruin of the earlier city that had been here, ignored by advancing architecture and a more savory society, its reputation falling to the level of the dregs who had sunk here. And the girl found her way through the streets with an air of long familiarity.

They moved down a long, dank tunnel, formed of dripping concrete and decaying beams, obviously an old viaduct, long since decaying in disuse. At the far end was a building with a screen across the window. There was the sound of a juke box, and a roar of loud laughter as they stepped inside and shouldered through the crowd of people sitting at the long bar in the half-light.

A woman was dancing on a walkway behind the bar, totally nude, and the crowd were laughing and shouting at her as a sick-looking drummer pounded a cymbal and the juke box whined. Griffin followed the girl through the fringes of the crowd and back along a dark, dripping corridor. They found a room, a frowsy makeshift of a dressing room that reeked of cheap perfume and dead rats. The girl motioned him inside. "You wait here. I'll be back."

Ten minutes later she returned, followed by a short, obese individual who sank down on a chair and regarded Griffin with pale,

dead eyes. "Got yourself a Retread friend, huh?" he said to the girl, jerking a fat thumb at Griffin.

She nodded tensely, and looked at Griffin. "Tell him what you want."

Griffin told him. The fat man listened. Then he said, "Rough. That's Government records. It'll take time."

"We've got no time," the girl snapped. "Then it'll take money." His pale eyes flicked up to the girl. "You financing?"

"I'm financing."

"All right." He rubbed his chin with a greasy finger. "How much time can you give me?"

"About twelve hours. There's a flight leaving at ten tonight. I've got to be on it."

The fat man hoisted himself out of the chair. "Relax," he said. "You got a long wait." Then he was gone in a breath of stale air.

THEY waited. They didn't relax. They sat in the reeking little room, and the noise from the front drifted back to them, tinny and unreal. There was laughter, and footfalls on the stairs beyond their wall. Then there was a clink of broken glass, and more laughter over their heads somewhere. The girl watched Griffin, and paced the room, her hands so jittery she could hardly hold them still to light a cigarette. Finally she said, "I'm going up front for a drink."

"You're staying here."

"Who do you think you are, you damn—"

"You leave, I leave," Griffin snapped. "In the opposite direction. Think it over."

She picked up a dusty whiskey bottle and slammed it against the far wall with a snarl. It bounced off, without even breaking. "Go to hell!" she spat. Then she sat down. "You'd think they were robbing the Treasury or something."

He closed his eyes, trying to get his breath in the dead air. His mind screamed with impatience. Why was it taking so long? But then, what good would it do him when he had his information? Whatever the plan had been, he had already upset it. Whoever was pushing the button, manipulating the strings, must be in a fine state by now. The thought gave him a

certain degree of sour pleasure. The button had been pushed, and he had not responded quite properly. And here, he knew he was beyond manipulation, beyond the grasp of whatever agency was making the plans for him. But whoever was directing the show would know now that he knew—

And he didn't doubt for a minute that something was planned for him. A man who was legally dead, a man whose wife would be resigned to his being dead, to her, and never expect to see him again, a man whose family had received the death insurance money that was due them upon his signature on the death certificate—whether he ever returned to his old life or not, that insurance would be paid—and now, a man who was wandering and frightened, a ghostly nonentity, existing in a society where he could not fit in, seeking something that he did not know. Personalities change, they had said. Perhaps.

But there were other changes, carefully controlled changes, he was certain of that now, changes that were made for a purpose, concealed from public inspection and public wrath by a careful groundwork of legal nonsense and humanitarianism. If anything about prosthesis went wrong, the public would fall upon it in an instant. Prosthesis was too touchy a thing, life was too fearful and mysterious and sacred, for halfway measures. The prosthesis had to be perfect. It could not have a price-tag. . . .

But now he knew that the sixty years' extension of life did have a price-tag, somehow. And very soon he would know the price.

V

SOMEONE jabbed him in the ribs, and he awoke with a jerk, blinking in the gloom. His mouth tasted like sweaty leather; he knew he had been sleeping. "What's the matter?"

"Wake up!" The girl was standing over him, her voice a harsh whisper.

He was alert in an instant. "The records—"

She thrust a packet into his hands, "We've got to go," she said. "There isn't much time. They were late."

"Just relax a minute." He tipped open

the packet. A roll of photostats fell out into his lap, still damp. He threw them on the dressing table, and snapped on a dirty yellow light.

"You can't read them now—"

He didn't even hear her. He stared at the names on the papers before him. Names he had never seen before. Not all new, though. Bob Whittaker had kept his old name. But the others—changed, just as their faces had changed. He read the entries under Whittaker's name. Job after job on Earth, months of drifting, observing, then drifting again. A run on the Mars-Earth line as a crew-hand. Imagine Whittaker a crew-hand on a space liner! Work in the mines on Mars. Back to Earth, and married to a girl he had never heard of.

And then, at the end of the page, a number, and a letter, and a date, and the words: CHECKED THROUGH.

There was nothing else.

Griffin stared at the paper, his heart pounding in his throat. The next was shorter. But at the bottom, the same story. Joe Meyer's picture, with a name Griffin had never seen before—

CHECKED THROUGH.

Phil Steinberg—*Checked through.*

It was like a trail in the snow that led one way out into the bright moonlight, into the middle of a field, and then stopped dead, without sign or struggle. Impossible. But the papers were there before him. *Checked through.*

Nobody to suspect, nobody to worry about tracing them down. Because they were dead. Free Agents. Beyond the law, beyond search and tracing. Dropped from sight.

The girl was shaking his arm, begging him to hurry. He rolled up the papers, thrust them into his inside pocket. He could not find his hat, and he swore under his breath, and they went out without it. Then they were on a surface car, curving up through the twilight into the New City again, until they spotted a street where cabs were passing. They hailed one, and the girl leaned back in the seat, trembling, as Griffin said, "Rocket Landing. Hurry."

And then he leaned back, a thousand phantoms flickering through his agitated mind.

HE HAD to get rid of her before he could do anything. He glared at the girl as they made their way across the Landing Building pavilion toward the endless rows of loading platforms, wishing he had never agreed to help her. Instinct told him to run, to leave her there and let her get aboard her ship as best she could, but he followed her grimly. The entrance guard passed them without argument when Griffin showed him his green stripe. "Venus ship? Platforms are down to the right—"

They moved down the rows of silent ships, and then she pointed. It was a huge ship, with a single light swinging on top of the gantry. "That's the one."

He glanced up at the ship. The gantry stood tall by her side, and her airlock was standing open. He pushed the crane buzzer; up above, the machinery began to squeak and groan as the platform started down.

"Who's down there?" The voice from above was harsh, and Griffin saw a head appear over the edge of the crane. "What do you want?"

"Free Agent," said Griffin. "I'd like to come abroad and take a look around."

"Not supposed to start loading for two hours," the voice grumbled.

"We're not shipping, we're just looking."

"All right. Come along."

The crane rumbled down and squeaked to a stop. Griffin and the girl stepped on the platform, and it started up again. At the top the guard peered at them suspiciously, hand on his gun belt. He fluoresced the green stencil on Griffin's arm, grunting. "Who's she?" he said.

"Free loader," said Griffin, tense. "Friend of mine."

The guard didn't like it. It was written a yard wide across his face. "Going to be long?"

"Not long. Just want to look around."

"Better keep forward, Free Agent. The pile's active."

"We won't go aft." Griffin moved through the lock, and the girl followed him. He heard a sound, then, a soft, swishing sound that sounded wrong. He whirled too late as the guard moved toward him. Powerful arms trapped him, held him tightly, and a hand clamped unceremoniously across his mouth. Something sharp bit

his arm, and he let out a little scream. And then, like pieces in a puzzle the whole grotesque picture slammed into place in his mind, and he fought like a wild man to break loose from the arms that held him.

After a while, he stopped struggling.

THE first sound he heard was not a sound at all, but a vibration, low, deep seated, swallowing his whole body as he lay there. He tried to sit up, and felt the leather bands catch his arms and legs and chest. He let out a little cry, and fumbled to unbuckle them, and then he rolled and spun crazily through the air until his boots struck metal, and caught him tight to the floor. A pang of nausea shot through him; he stared wide-eyed at the empty cabin, the dozen slanted acceleration cots, all empty. He struggled to the closed hatchway in front, and fought it open, his mind screaming. And then he was in the control room, staring at the empty seats in front of the panel, and above the rows of glittering keys, the curved plexiglass giving out to the black expanse of space with its millions of bright pinpoints.

He gave a strangled cry, and pushed up against the glass, staring down at the still-dwindling discs below him, one pale greenish-blue, the other, much smaller, dead white against the blackness. And then he was clawing the glass, screaming and sobbing and cursing like a madman. He stared out the glass, and down at the panel, and slowly, like a malignant poison seeping into his mind, he began to realize what it meant.

He knew now where he was going. He knew now the price-tag. Not to Venus, not to Mars—it would be too easy to return from there, it would be idiotic to shanghai a person aboard a ship to take him to Mars or Venus—he could simply turn around and come back home. Not to Venus, not to Mars. Not anywhere in the Solar System—

He saw it clearly, as bits of evidence fell into place. Man had been aiming at the stars for centuries. It was sure to come; the frontier had expanded year by year—across Africa, across Asia, across Antarctica—to the moon, to the planets. Always the expanding frontier, until now, when it had expanded beyond man's reach. For man

could not go to the stars. There was no light-speed drive to carry him there, the journey would take too long. Once a man had grown to maturity, and been educated, and reached an age where he could move out on the long journey, he would be too old. The journey could never take less than twenty-five or thirty years, with the rocket drive man had, and man would be too old to be useful when he arrived at his destination. A man aged 25 at the start of the journey would spend his prime years in transit; he would be fifty, or sixty, or seventy or more before he arrived. There could be no round trips, there could be no exploration, or colonization, or anything else. Man would be too old—

Unless he be born again—

But Griffin had been born again. He had a new body, and now, in the barest infancy of his new life, with sixty or seventy or eighty years of life left before him, he was on the first lap of the journey—to the stars. This was the price-tag, this was how the government was using the techniques which gave men new lives—in order to carry Earth to the stars.

VI

AND then he decided that they weren't going to get away with it. His despair was giving way to a burning rage. He was trapped, and he knew it, and the very helplessness infuriated him. He had never been on a ship before, he knew nothing about controls, or lifeboats, or navigation, but he knew a little about engines. Properly treated, they would drive a space ship. Improperly treated, they could explode.

He knew it would mean his life, and he didn't care any more. He started back through the cabin to the hatchway at the rear. It was closed. He fell upon it savagely, struggling to throw it open.

"That won't do any good," a voice said behind him. "It's locked."

He whirled, staring at the black-haired girl as if she were a ghost. And then he began kicking at the hatch again. "I'll break it open, then," he snarled, "and if you don't like it, that's too bad—"

"Stop it!" The girl was upon him now,

wrenching at his wrist. "Stop it, you silly fool, and listen to me for a minute—"

"I listened to you before, and you sold me out." He struggled to break away from her. "I don't know where you were hiding, but you sold me out. It was a great act, but it's over now, and now you can go with me—"

Then she said: "The ship will touch on Titan for an hour or more. You can leave it then, if you like."

His jaw sagged, and he stared at her, the fear and bitterness and despair giving way to confusion. "On—Titan?"

"That's what I said. You didn't think you'd be awake and able to move about now if the ship were headed out, did you? You'd be under deep-sleep for two weeks. Use your head."

He gaped at her. His thinking began tumbling down around his ears, and he gasped at it wildly. "But it's going out—"

"Oh, yes. It's going out—from Titan. With a full load. Men and women aboard, voluntarily aboard. Men and women just like you."

"Then it is true. We grow old and start to die, and they take us to the Center and make us new again, so we can be shanghaied aboard ships and driven out to the stars, whether we like it or not. What's the matter—is the government afraid of us? Or is it just greedy to hand the people Centauri on a silver platter?"

"I said you could get off on Titan if you want," the girl snapped.

"Sure," he sneered. "I believe you. Anything you say now, I believe it. Go ahead, say something more. Say something about the rest of the suckers that are coming through now, the ones who think they can have a new life without a price-tag on it. How about them? Can they get off on Titan too?"

"You've got it wrong, Griffin," the girl said sadly. "You've got it backwards. Right facts, wrong conclusion. Your cause and effect are backwards."

"I don't get you." Griffin's voice was leaden.

"You weren't made new again so you could be placed on this ship. You were placed on this ship because you'd been made new again."

Griffin stared at her. "You mean because I'm different now? Because there's something wrong with me?"

She hesitated. "In a sense—"

"*In a sense!* I'm either a whole, complete human being or I'm not! *Now which is it?*"

"Oh, no, no," cried the girl wearily. "Can't you see that's just the idea we've been fighting against for so long? Look, Griffin. *You're alive.* You've got sixty more years of life. A long, useful life. But if it's not a useful life in the society where you lived before, does that make it wrong? They have skill and techniques to give perfectly good new bodies to men and women who would die without them. Could it ever be right to deny that life to the people who wanted it? Could they turn them back, and say 'No, we can give you life, but we've decided not to use it.' Could they do that?"

Griffin shook his head. "What happened? Back when it first started. What went wrong?"

The girl sat down, facing him. "Some didn't change at all. Some went back, just as they were before. Others tried it, and went insane. Some committed suicide. Others lived out lives of utter misery trying to fit a pattern they could never be part of. They were a kind of human being which had never existed before—an infant personality superimposed on a grown, mature body, thrust out into a highly organized, rigid society. They couldn't survive." She looked up at Griffin. "The government got the Free Agent legislation through, finally. It helped some, but not enough. Most of them were looking for something that just didn't exist. They searched, and floundered, and tried one thing and another, and in the end they were bitter, and confused, and utterly helpless. So they went to the stars."

The girl walked out into the control room, and stared out at the bright pinpoints of light in the blackness. Griffin followed her, his body and mind both numb. "What about Mars, or Venus?" he said.

"No good. They were just the old Earth society in a different setting, trying like crazy to duplicate things back on Earth. But on a new planet, in a new solar system, a *new* society would have a chance. On a dozen planets a dozen societies could be

created." She laughed wryly. "You and your price-tag! You can go back to Earth, Griffin. But you'll die there. You'd never have believed that if we'd told you at the start. You remembered your old life too well. You thought it would be so easy to go back to it. We had to let you try, and you tried. Maybe now you can believe it. You can go back to Earth, if you want to, or you can ship out and make your own world to live in. You're a Free Agent. It's up to you."

He heard them coming aboard. He lay still on the acceleration couch, his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep, but his ears strained for the familiar sounds, and he heard the crane moving up the side of the ship, and the people coming aboard.

There was little talking. They moved quietly, and they paid practically no attention to him. He felt sure that they knew he was awake, but they came aboard, and took their places, and began to strap themselves in without a word.

The girl with the black hair was gone. She had work to do, back on Earth—the same work she had done with him, another flounderer to bring in, perhaps in a slightly different fashion, but essentially the same. And someday she, too, would be on the way out—

He waited in silence, and he could not have put into words the thoughts that flooded his mind. He waited, and his body grew tight; he heard the sounds coming from below, an occasional shout, the screeching of machinery, the hiss of airlocks closing. And then the ship was silent. Still he waited—

A whir started, somewhere in the depths of the ship. It grew to a growl, then to a roar. In a peal of thunder he felt himself crushed to the cot, felt his eyelids pressed tight over his eyes, felt his face muscles sag under the crush of the powerful acceleration, and he knew the ship was rising in earnest this time.

A thought crossed his mind as he sank into the blackness of the deep-sleep that would carry him through the acceleration. He would have smiled, if he could have. They'd told him the truth. A Free Agent could go anywhere he wanted to go—

Even to the stars.

It was a robots' world, run by soul-less heaps of haughty metal. But among the miserable band of humans, there was one who aspired to greatness; one who aimed to bust out of his subservient shell. He was the Time-Window-Kid . . . he was . . .

JAMES P. CROW

By PHILIP K. DICK

"YOU'RE a nasty little—*human being*," the newly-formed Z Type robot shrilled peevishly.

Donnie flushed and slunk away. It was true. He was a human being, a human child. And there was nothing science could do. He was stuck with it. A human being in a robot's world.

He wished he were dead. He wished he lay under the grass and the worms were eating him up and crawling through him and devouring his brain, his poor miserable human's brain. The Z-236r, his robot companion, wouldn't have anybody to play with and it would be sorry.

"Where are you going?" Z-236r demanded.

"Home."

"Sissy."

Donnie didn't reply. He gathered up his set of fourth dimensional chess, stuffed it in his pocket, and walked off between the rows of ecarda trees, toward the human quarter. Behind him, Z-236r stood gleaming in the late afternoon sun, a pale tower of metal and plastic.

"See if I care," Z-236r shouted sullenly. "Who wants to play with a human being, anyhow? Go on home. You—you smell."

Donnie said nothing. But he hunched over a little more. And his chin sank lower against his chest.

"Well, it happened," Edgar Parks said gloomily to his wife, across the kitchen table.

Grace looked quickly up. "It?"

"Donnie learned his place today. He told me while I was changing my clothes. One of the new robots he was playing with. Called him a human being. Poor kid.

Why the hell do they have to rub it in? Why can't they let us alone?"

"So that's why he didn't want any dinner. He's in his room. I knew something had happened." Grace touched her husband's hand. "He'll get over it. We all have to learn the hard way. He's strong. He'll snap back."

Ed Parks got up from the table and moved into the livingroom of his modest five-room dwelling unit, located in the section of the city set aside for humans. He didn't feel like eating. "Robots." He clenched his fists futilely. "I'd like to get hold of one of them. Just once. Get my hands into their guts. Rip out handfuls of wire and parts. Just once before I die."

"Maybe you'll get your chance."

"No. No, it'll never come to that. Anyhow, humans wouldn't be able to run things without robots. It's true, honey. Humans haven't got the integration to maintain a society. The Lists prove that twice a year. Let's face it. Humans are inferior to robots. But it's their damn holding it up to us! Like today with Donnie. Holding it up to our faces. I don't mind being a robot's body servant. It's a good job. Pays well and the work is light. But when my kid gets told he's—"

Ed broke off. Donnie had come out of his room slowly, into the livingroom. "Hi, Dad."

"Hi, son." Ed thumped the boy gently on the back. "How you doing? Want to take in a show tonight?"

Humans entertained nightly on the vid-screens. Humans made good entertainers. That was one area the robots couldn't compete in. Human beings painted and wrote and danced and sang and acted for



the amusement of robots. They cooked better, too, but robots didn't eat. Human beings had their place. They were understood and wanted: as body servants, entertainers, clerks, gardeners, construction workers, repairmen, odd-jobbers and factory workers.

But when it came to something like civic

Ed got up abruptly and paced around the room, filling his pipe and frowning. "Well, son, that's hard to say. I mean, humans don't have access to the C-Bank records. So I can't check and see. The law says any human who gets a score in the top forty per cent is eligible for classification with a gradual upward gradation ac



control coordinator or traffic supervisor for the usone tapes that fed energy into the planet's twelve hydro-systems—

"DAD," Donnie said, "can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Ed sat down on the couch with a sigh. He leaned back and crossed his legs. "What is it?"

Donnie sat quietly beside him, his little round face serious. "Dad, I want to ask you about the Lists."

"Oh, yeah." Ed rubbed his jaw. "That's right. Lists in a few weeks. Time to start boning up for your entry. We'll get out some of the sample tests and go over them. Maybe between the two of us we can get you ready for Class Twenty."

"Listen." Donnie leaned close to his father, his voice low and intense. "Dad, how many humans have ever passed their Lists?"

cording to subsequent showing. I don't know how many humans have been able to—"

"Has any human ever passed his List?"

Ed swallowed nervously. "Gosh, kid. I don't know. I mean, I don't honestly know of any, when you put it like that. Maybe not. The Lists have been conducted only three hundred years. Before that the Government was reactionary and forbade humans to compete with robots. Nowadays, we have a liberal Government and we can compete on the Lists and if we get high enough scores . . ." His voice wavered and faded. "No, kid," he said miserably. "No human ever passed a List. We're—just—not—smart enough."

The room was silent. Donnie nodded faintly, expressionless. Ed didn't look at him. He concentrated on his pipe, hands shaking.

"It's not so bad," Ed said huskily. "I

have a good job. I'm body servant to a hell of a fine N-Type robot. I get big tips at Christmas and Easter. It gives me time off when I'm sick." He cleared his throat noisily. "It's not so bad."

Grace was standing at the door. Now she came into the room, eyes bright. "No, not bad. Not at all. You open doors for it, bring its instruments to it, make calls for it, run errands for it, oil it, repair it, sing to it, talk to it, scan tapes for it—"

"Shut up," Ed muttered irritably. "What the hell should I do? Quit? Maybe I should mow lawns like John Hollister and Pete Klein. At least my robot calls me by name. Like a living thing. It calls me Ed."

"Will a human ever pass a List?" Donnie asked.

"Yes," Grace said sharply.

Ed nodded. "Sure, kid. Of course. Someday maybe humans and robots will live together in equality. There's an Equality Party among the robots. Holds ten seats in the Congress. They think humans should be admitted without Lists. Since it's obvious—" He broke off. "I mean, since no humans have ever been able to pass their Lists so far—"

"Donnie," Grace said fiercely, bending down over her son. "Listen to me. I want you to pay attention. Nobody knows this. The robots don't talk about it. Humans don't know. But it's true."

"What is it?"

"I know of a human being who—who's classified. He passed his Lists. Ten years ago. And he's gone up. He's up to Class Two. Someday he'll be Class One. Do you hear? A human being. And he's going up."

Donnie's face showed doubt. "Really?" The doubt turned to wistful hope. "Class Two? No kidding?"

"No kidding," Grace said.

"It's just a story," Ed grunted. "I've heard that all my life."

"It's true! I heard two robots talking about it when I was cleaning up one of the Engineering Units. They stopped when they noticed me."

"What's his name?" Donnie asked, wide-eyed.

"James P. Crow," Grace said proudly.

"Strange name," Ed murmured.

"That's his name. I know. It's not a

story. It's true! And sometime, someday, he'll be on the top level. On the Supreme Council."

BOB MCINTYRE lowered his voice. "Yeah, it's true, all right. James P. Crow is his name."

"It's not a legend?" Ed demanded eagerly.

"There really is such a human. And he's Class Two. Gone all the way up. Passed his Lists like *that*," McIntyre snapped his fingers. "The robs hush it up, but it's a fact. And the news is spreading. More and more humans know."

The two men had stopped by the service entrance of the enormous Structural Research Building. Robot officials moved busily in and out through the main doors, at the front of the building. Robot planners who guided Terran society with skill and efficiency.

Robots ran Earth. It had always been that way. The history tapes said so. Humans had been invented during the Total War of the Eleventh Millibar. All types of weapons had been tested and used; humans were one of many. The War had utterly wrecked society. For decades after, anarchy and ruin lay everywhere. Only gradually had society reformed under the patient guidance of robots. Humans had been useful in the reconstruction. But why they had originally been made, what they had been used for, how they had served in the War—all knowledge had perished in the hydrogen bomb blasts. The historians had to fill in with conjecture. They did so.

"Why such a strange name?" Ed asked.

McIntyre shrugged. "All I know is he's sub-Advisor to the Northern Security Conference. And in line for the Council when he makes Class One."

"What do the robs think?"

"They don't like it. But there's nothing they can do. The law says they have to let a human hold a job if he's qualified. They never thought a human would be qualified, of course. But this Crow passed his Lists."

"It certainly is strange. A human, smarter than the robs. I wonder why."

"He was an ordinary repairman. A mechanic, fixing machinery and designing circuits. Unclassified, of course. Then suddenly

he passed his first List. Entered Class Twenty. He rose the next bi-annual to Class Nineteen. They had to put him to work." McIntyre chuckled. "Too damn bad, isn't it? They have to sit with a human being."

"How do they react?"

"Some quit. Walk out, rather than sit with a human. But most stay. A lot of robots are decent. They try hard."

"I'd sure like to meet this fellow Crow."

McIntyre frowned. "Well—"

"What is it?"

"I understand he doesn't like to be seen with humans too much."

"Why not?" Ed bristled. "What's wrong with humans? Is he too high and mighty, sitting up there with robots—"

"It's not that." There was a strange look in McIntyre's eyes. A yearning, distant look. "It's not just that, Ed. He's up to something. Something important. I shouldn't be saying. But it's big. Big as hell."

"What is it?"

"I can't say. But wait until he gets on the Council. Wait." McIntyre's eyes were feverish. "It's so big it'll shake the world. The stars and the sun'll shake."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. But Crow's got something up his sleeve. Something incredibly big. We're all waiting for it. Waiting for the day. . . ."

JAMES P. CROW sat at his polished mahogany desk, thinking. That wasn't his real name, of course. He had taken it after the first experiments, grinning to himself as he did so. Nobody would ever know what it meant; it would remain a private joke, personal and unannounced. But it was a good joke nonetheless. Biting and appropriate.

He was a small man. Irish-German. A little lean light-skinned man with blue eyes and sandy hair that fell down in his face and had to be brushed back. He wore unpressed baggy pants and rolled-up sleeves. He was nervous, high-strung. He smoked all day and drank black coffee and usually couldn't sleep at night. But there was a lot on his mind.

A hell of a lot. Crow got abruptly to his feet and paced over to the vidsender. "Send

in the Commissioner of Colonies," he ordered.

The Commissioner's metal and plastic body pushed through the door, into the office. An R Type robot, patient and efficient. "You wished to—" It broke off, seeing a human. For a second its pale eye-lens flickered doubtfully. A faint sheen of distaste spread across its features. "You wished to see me?"

Crow had seen that expression before. Endless times. He was used to it—almost. The surprise, and then the lofty withdrawal, the cold, clipped formality. He was "Mister Crow." Not Jim. The law made them address him as an equal. It hurt some of them more than others. Some showed it without restraint. This one held its feelings back a trifle; Crow was its official superior.

"Yes, I wished to see you," Crow said calmly. "I want your report. Why hasn't it come in?"

The robot stalled, still lofty and withdrawn. "Such a report takes time. We're doing the best we can."

"I want it within two weeks. No later."

The robot struggled with itself, life-long prejudices versus the requirements of Governmental codes. "All right, *sir*. The report will be ready in two weeks." It moved out of the office. The door formed behind it.

Crow let his breath out with a rush. Doing the best they could? Hardly. Not to please a human being. Even if he was at Advisory Level, Class Two. They all dragged their feet, all the way down the line. Little things here and there.

His door melted and a robot wheeled quickly into the office. "I say there, Crow. Got a minute?"

"Of course." Crow grinned. "Come in and sit down. I'm always glad to talk to you."

The robot dumped some papers on Crow's desk. "Tapes and such. Business trifles." It eyed Crow intently. "You look upset. Anything happen?"

"A report I want. Overdue. Somebody taking its time."

L-87t grunted. "Same old stuff. By the way . . . We're having a meeting tonight. Want to come over and make a speech? Should have a good turn out."

"Meeting?"

"Party meeting. Equality." L-87t made a quick sign with its right gripper, a sort of half-arc in the air. The Equality sign. "We'd be glad to have you, Jim. Want to come?"

"No. I'd like to, but I have things to do."

"Oh." The robot moved toward the door. "All right. Thanks anyhow." It lingered at the door. "You'd give us a shot in the arm, you know. Living proof of our contention that a human being is the equal of a robot and should be afforded such recognition."

Crow smiled faintly. "But a human isn't the equal of a robot."

L-87t sputtered indignantly. "What are you saying? Aren't you the living proof? Look at your List scores. Perfect. Not a mistake. And in a couple of weeks you'll Be Class One. Highest there is."

Crow shook his head. "Sorry. A human isn't the equal of a robot anymore than he's the equal of a stove. Or a diesel motor. Or a snowplow. There are a lot of things a human can't do. Let's face facts."

L-87t was baffled. "But—"

"I mean it. You're ignoring reality. Humans and robots are completely different. We humans can sing, act, write plays, stories, operas, paint, design sets, flower gardens, buildings, cook delicious meals, make love, scratch sonnets on menus—and robots can't. But robots can build elaborate cities and machines that function perfectly, work for days without rest, think without emotional interruption, gestalt complex data without a time lag.

"Humans excel in some fields, robots in others. Humans have highly developed emotions and feelings. Esthetic awareness. We're sensitive to colors and sounds and textures and soft music mixed with wine. All very fine things. Worthwhile. But realms totally beyond robots. Robots are purely intellectual. Which is fine, too. Both realms are fine. Emotional humans, sensitive to art and music and drama. Robots who think and plan and design machinery. But that doesn't mean we're both the same."

L-87t shook its head sadly. "I don't understand you, Jim. Don't you want to help your race?"

"Of course. But realistically. Not by ignoring facts and making an illusionary assertion that men and robots are interchangeable. Identical elements."

A curious look slid across L-87t's eye lens. "What's your solution, then?"

Crow clamped his jaw tight. "Stick around another few weeks and maybe you'll see."

CROW headed out of the Terran Security Building and along the street. Around him robots streamed, bright hulls of metal and plastic and dn fluid. Except for body servants, humans never came to this area. This was the managerial section of the city, the core, the nucleus, where the planning and organization went on. From this area the life of the city was controlled. Robots were everywhere. In the surface cars, on the moving ramps, the balconies, entering buildings, streaming out, standing in pale glowing knots here and there like Roman Senators, talking and discussing business.

A few greeted him, faintly, formally, with a nod of their metal heads. And then turned their backs. Most robots ignored him or pulled aside to avoid contact. Sometimes a clump of talking robots would become abruptly silent, as Crow pushed past. Robot eye lenses fixed on him, solemn and half astonished. They noticed his arm color, Class Two. Surprise and indignation. And after he had passed, a quick angry buzz of resentment. Backward glances at him as he threaded his way toward the human quarter.

A pair of humans stood in front of the Domestic Control Offices, armed with pruning shears and rakes. Gardeners, weeding and watering the lawns of the big public building. They watched Crow pass with excited stares. One waved nervously at him, feverish and hopeful. A menial human waving at the only human ever to reach classification.

Crow waved back briefly.

The two humans' eyes grew wide with awe and reverence. They were still looking after him when he turned the corner at the main intersection and mixed with the business crowds shopping at the trans-planet marts.

Goods from the wealthy colonies of Venus and Mars and Ganymede filled the open-

air marts. Robots drifted in swarms, sampling and pricing and discussing and gossiping. A few humans were visible, mostly household servants in charge of maintenance, stocking up on supplies. Crow edged his way through and beyond the marts. He was approaching the human quarter of the city. He could smell it already. The faint pungent scent of humans.

The robots, of course, were odorless. In a world of odorless machines the human scent stood out in bold relief. The human quarter was a section of the city once prosperous. Humans had moved in and property values had dropped. Gradually the houses had been abandoned by robots and now humans exclusively lived there. Crow, in spite of his position, was obliged to live in the human quarter. His house, a uniform five-room dwelling, identical with all the others, was located to the rear of the quarter. One house of many.

He held his hand up to the front door and the door melted. Crow entered quickly and the door reformed. He glanced at his watch. Plenty of time. An hour before he was due back at his desk.

He rubbed his hands. It was always a thrilling moment to come here, to his personal quarters, where he had grown up, lived as an ordinary unclassified human being—before he had come across *it* and begun his meteoric ascent into the upper-class regions.

CROW passed through the small silent house, to the work shed in back. He unlocked the bolted doors and slid them aside. The shed was hot and dry. He clicked off the alarm system. Complex tangles of bells and wires that were really unnecessary: robots never entered the human section, and humans seldom stole from each other.

Locking the doors behind him, Crow seated himself before a bank of machinery assembled in the center of the shed. He snapped on the power and the machinery hummed into life. Dials and meters swung into activity. Lights glowed.

Before him, a square window of gray faded to light pink and shimmered slightly. The Window. Crow's pulse throbbed painfully. He flicked a key. The Window

clouded and showed a scene. He slid a tape scanner before the Window and activated it. The scanner clicked as the Window gained shape. Forms moved, dim forms that wavered and hesitated. He steadied the picture.

Two robots were standing behind a table. They moved quickly, jerkily. He slowed them down. The two robots were handling something. Crow increased the power of the image and the objects bloated up, to be caught by the scanning lens and preserved on tape.

The robots were sorting Lists. Class One Lists. Grading and dividing them into groups. Several hundred packets of questions and answers. Before the table a restless crowd waited, eager robots waiting to hear their scores. Crow speeded the image up. The two robots leaped into activity, tossing and arranging Lists in a blur of energy. Then the master Class One List was held up—

The List. Crow caught it in the Window, dropping the velocity to zero. The List was held, fixed tight like a specimen on a slide. The tape scanner hummed away, recording the questions and answers.

He felt no guilt. No sting of conscience at using a Time Window to see the results of future Lists. He had been doing it ten years, all the way up from the bottom, from unclassified up to the top List, to Class One. He had never kidded himself. Without advance sight of the answers he could never have passed. He would still be unclassified, at the bottom of the pile, along with the great undifferentiated mass of humans.

The Lists were geared to robot minds. Made up by robots, phased to a robot culture. A culture which was alien to humans, to which humans had to make difficult adjustment. No wonder only robots passed their Lists.

Crow wiped the scene from the Window and threw the scanner aside. He sent the Window back into time, spinning back through the centuries into the past. He never tired of seeing the early days, the days before the Total War wrecked human society and destroyed all human tradition. The days when man lived without robots.

He fiddled with the dials, capturing a

moment. The Window showed robots building up their post-war society, swarming over the ruined planet, erecting vast cities and buildings, clearing away the debris. With humans as slaves. Second-class servant citizens.

He saw the Total War, the rain of death from the sky. The blossoming pale funnels of destruction. He saw man's society dissolve into radioactive particles. All human knowledge and culture lost in the chaos.

And once again, he caught his favorite of all scenes. A scene he had examined repeatedly, enjoying with acute satisfaction this unique sight. A scene of human beings in an undersurface lab, in the early days of the war. Designing and building the first robots, the original A Type robots, four centuries before.

ED PARKS walked home slowly, holding his son's hand. Donnie gazed down at the ground. He said nothing. His eyes were red and puffy. He was pale with misery.

"I'm sorry, Dad," he muttered.

Ed's grip tightened. "It's okay, kid. You did your best. Don't worry about it. Maybe next time. We'll get started practicing sooner." He cursed under his breath. "Those lousy metal tubs. Damn soul-less heaps of tin!"

It was evening. The sun was setting. The two of them climbed the porch steps slowly and entered the house. Grace met them at the door. "No luck?" She studied their faces. "I can see. Same old story."

"Same old story," Ed said bitterly. "He didn't have a chance. Hopeless."

From the dining room came a murmur of sound. Voices, men and women.

"Who's in there?" Ed demanded irritably. "Do we have to have company? For God's sake, today of all days—"

"Come on." Grace pulled him toward the kitchen. "Some news. Maybe it'll make you feel better. Come along, Donnie. This will interest you, too."

Ed and Donnie entered the kitchen. It was full of people. Bob McIntyre and his wife Pat. John Hollister and his wife Joan and their two daughters. Pete Klein and Rose Klein. Neighbors, Nat Johnson and

Tim Davis and Barbara Stanley. An eager murmur buzzed through the room. Everybody was grouped around the table, excited and nervous. Sandwiches and beer bottles were piled up in heaps. The men and women were laughing and grinning happily, eyes bright with agitation.

"What's up?" Ed grumbled. "Why the party?"

Bob McIntyre clapped him on the shoulder. "How you doing, Ed? We've got news." He rattled a public news tape. "Get ready. Brace yourself."

"Read it to him," Pete Klein said excitedly.

"Go on! Read it!" They all grouped around McIntyre. "Let's hear it again!"

McIntyre's face was alive with emotion. "Well, Ed. This is it. He made it. He's there."

"Who? Who made what?"

"Crow. Jim Crow. He made Class One."

The tape spool trembled in McIntyre's hand. "He's been named to the Supreme Council. Understand? He's in. A human being. A member of the supreme governing body of the planet."

"Gosh," Donnie said, awed.

"Now what?" Ed asked. "What's he going to do?"

McIntyre grinned shakily. "We'll know, soon. He's got something. We know. We can feel it. And we should start seeing it in action—any time, now."

CROW strode briskly into the Council Chamber, his portfolio under his arm. He wore a slick new suit. His hair was combed. His shoes were shined. "Good day," he said politely.

The five robots regarded him with mixed feelings. They were old, over a century old. The powerful N Type that had dominated the social scene since its construction. And an incredibly ancient D Type, almost three centuries old. As Crow advanced toward his seat the five robots stepped away, leaving a wide path for him.

"You," one of the N Types said. "You are the new Council member?"

"That's right," Crow took his seat. "Care to examine my credentials?"

"Please."

Crow passed over the card plate given

him by the Lists Committee. The five robots studied it intently. Finally they passed it back.

"It appears to be in order," the D admitted reluctantly.

"Of course." Crow unzipped his portfolio. "I wish to begin work at once. There's quite a lot of material to cover. I have some reports and tapes you'll find worth your while."

The robots took their places slowly, eyes still on Jim Crow. "This is incredible," the D said. "Are you serious? Can you really expect to sit with us?"

"Of course," Crow snapped. "Let's forego this and get down to business."

One of the N Types leaned toward him, massive and contemptuous, its patina-encrusted hull glinting dully. "Mr. Crow," it said icily. "You must understand this is utterly impossible. In spite of the legal ruling and your technical right to sit on this—"

Crow smiled calmly back. "I suggest you check my List scoring. You'll discover I've made no errors in all twenty Lists. A perfect score. To my knowledge, none of you has achieved a perfect score. Therefore, according to the Governmental ruling contained in the official Lists Committee decree, I'm your superior."

The word fell like a bomb shell. The five robots slumped down in their seats, stricken. Their eye lenses flickered uneasily. A worried hum rose in pitch, filling the chamber.

"Let's see," an N murmured, extending its gripper. Crow tossed his List sheets over and the five robots each scanned them rapidly.

"It's true," the D stated. "Incredible. No robot has ever achieved a perfect score. This human outranks us, according to our own laws."

"Now," Crow said. "Let's get down to business." He spread out his tapes and reports. "I won't waste any time. I have a proposal to make. An important proposal bearing on the most critical problem of this society."

"What problem is that?" an X asked apprehensively.

Crow was tense. "The problem of humans. Humans occupying an inferior posi-

tion in a robot world. Menials in an alien culture. Servants of robots."

Silence.

THE five robots sat frozen. It had happened. The thing they had feared. Crow sat back in his chair, lighting a cigarette. The robots watched each motion, his hands, the cigarette, the smoke, the match as he ground it out underfoot. The moment had come.

"What do you propose?" the D asked at last, with metallic dignity. "What is this proposal of yours?"

"I propose you robots evacuate Earth at once. Pack up and leave. Emigrate to the colonies. Ganymede, Mars, Venus. Leave Earth to us humans."

The robots got instantly up. "Incredible! We built this world. This is our world! Earth belongs to us. It has always belonged to us."

"Has it?" Crow said grimly.

An uneasy chill moved through the robots. They hesitated, strangely alarmed. "Of course," the D murmured.

Crow reached toward his heap of tapes and reports. The robots watched his movement with fear. "What is that?" an N demanded nervously. "What do you have there?"

"Tapes," Crow said.

"What kind of tapes?"

"History tapes." Crow signalled and a gray-clad human servant hurried into the chamber with a tape scanner. "Thanks," Crow said. The human started out. "Wait. You might like to stay and watch this, my friend."

The servant's eyes bulged. He found a place in the back and stood trembling and watching.

"Highly irregular," the D protested. "What are you doing? What is this?"

"Watch." Crow snapped on the scanner, feeding the first tape into it. In the air, in the center of the Council table, a three-dimensional image formed. "Keep your eyes on this. You'll remember this moment for a long time."

The image hardened. They were looking into the Time Window. A scene from the Total War was in motion. Men, human technicians, working frantically in an under-

surface lab. Assembling something. Assembling—

The human servant squawked wildly. "An A! It's a Type A robot! They're making it!"

The five Council robots buzzed in consternation. "Get that servant out of here!" the D ordered.

The scene changed. It showed the first robots, the original Type A, rising to the surface to fight the war. Other early robots appeared, snaking through the ruins and ash, approaching warily. The robots clashed. Bursts of white light. Gleaming clouds of particles.

"Robots were originally designed as soldiers," Crow explained. "Then more advanced types were produced to act as technicians and lab workers and machinists."

The scene showed an undersurface factory. Rows of robots worked presses and stampers. The robots worked rapidly, efficiently—supervised by human foremen.

"These tapes are fake!" an N cried angrily. "Do you expect us to believe this?"

A new scene formed. Robots, more advanced, types more complex and elaborate. Taking over more and more economic and industrial functions as humans were destroyed by the War.

"At first robots were simple," Crow explained. "They served simple needs. Then, as the War progressed, more advanced types were created. Finally, humans were making Types D and E. Equal to humans—and in conceptual faculties, superior to humans."

"This is insane!" an N stated. "Robots evolved. The early types were simple because they were original stages, primitive forms that gave rise to more complex forms. The laws of evolution fully explain this process."

A new scene formed. The last stages of the War. Robots fighting men. Robots eventually winning. The complete chaos of the latter years. Endless wastes of rolling ash and radioactive particles. Miles of ruin.

"All cultural records were destroyed," Crow said. "Robots emerged masters without knowing how or why, or in what manner they came into being. But now you see the facts. Robots were created as human tools. During the war they got out of hand."

He snapped off the tape scanner. The image faded. The five robots sat in stunned silence.

Crow folded his arms. "Well? What do you say?" He jerked his thumb at the human servant crouching in the rear of the chamber, dazed and astonished. "Now you know and now he knows. What do you imagine he's thinking? I can tell you. He's thinking—"

"How did you get these tapes?" the D demanded. "They can't be genuine. They must be fakes."

"Why weren't they found by our archeologists?" an N shouted shrilly.

"I took them personally," Crow said.

"You took them? What do you mean?"

"Through a Time Window." Crow tossed a thick package onto the table. "Here are the schematics. You can build a Time Window yourself if you want."

"A time machine." The D snatched up the package and leafed through the contents. "You saw into the past." Dawning realization showed on its ancient face. "Then—"

"He saw ahead!" an N searched wildly. "Into the future! That explains his perfect Lists. He scanned them in advance."

Crow rattled his papers impatiently. "You've heard my proposal. You've seen the tapes. If you vote down the proposal I'll release the tapes publicly. And the schematics. Every human in the world will know the true story of his origin, and of yours."

"So?" an N said nervously. "We can handle humans. If there's an uprising we'll put it down."

"Will you?" Crow got suddenly to his feet, his face hard. "Consider. Civil war raging over the whole planet. Men on one side, centuries of pent-up hatred. On the other side robots suddenly deprived of their myth. Knowing they were originally mechanical tools. Are you sure you'll come out on top this time? Are you positive?"

The robots were silent.

"If you'll evacuate Earth I'll suppress the tapes. The two races can go on, each with its own culture and society. Humans here on Earth. Robots on the colonies. Neither one master. Neither one slave."

The five robots hesitated, angry and

resentful. "But we worked centuries to build up this planet! It won't make sense. Our leaving. What'll we say? What'll we give as our reason?"

Crow smiled harshly. "You can say Earth isn't adequate for the great original master race."

There was silence. The four Type N robots looked at each other nervously, drawing together in a whispered huddle. The massive D sat silent, its archaic brass eye lens fixed intently on Crow, a baffled, defeated expression on its face.

Calmly, Jim Crow waited.

"CAN I shake your hand?" L-87t asked timidly. "I'll be going soon, I'm in one of the first loads."

Crow stuck out his hand briefly and L-87t shook, a little embarrassed.

"I hope it works out," L-87t ventured. "Vid us from time to time. Keep us posted."

Outside the Council Buildings the blaring voices of the street speakers were beginning to disturb the late afternoon gloom. All up and down the city the speakers roared out their message, the Council Directive.

Men, scurrying home from work, paused to listen. In the uniform houses in the human quarter men and women glanced up, pausing in their routine of living, curious and attentive. Everywhere, in all the cities of Earth, robots and human beings ceased their activities and looked up as the Government speakers roared into life.

"This is to announce that the Supreme Council has decreed the rich colony planets Venus, Mars, and Ganymede, are to be set aside exclusively for the use of robots. No humans will be permitted outside of Earth. In order to take advantage of the superior resources and living conditions of these colonies, all robots now on Earth are to be transferred to the colony of their choice.

"The Supreme Council has decided that

Earth is no fit place for robots. Its wasted and still partly-devastated condition renders it unworthy of the robot race. All robots are to be conveyed to their new homes in the colonies as quickly as adequate transportation can be arranged.

"In no case can humans enter the colony areas. The colonies are exclusively for the use of robots. The human population will be permitted to remain on Earth.

"This is to announce that the Supreme Council has decreed that the rich colony planets of Venus—"

Crow moved away from the window, satisfied.

He returned to his desk and continued assembling papers and reports in neat piles, glancing at them briefly as he classified them and laid them aside.

"I hope you humans will get along all right," L-87t repeated. Crow continued checking the heaps of top-level reports, marking them with his writing stick. Working rapidly, with absorbed attention, deep in his work. He scarcely noticed the robot lingering at the door. "Can you give me some idea of the government you'll set up?"

Crow glanced up impatiently. "What?"

"Your form of government. How will your society be ruled, now that you've maneuvered us off Earth? What sort of government will take place of our Supreme Council and Congress?"

Crow didn't answer. He had already returned to his work. There was a strange granite cast to his face, a peculiar hardness L-87t had never seen.

"Who'll run things?" L-87t asked. "Who'll be the Government now that we're gone? You said yourself humans show no ability to manage a complex modern society. Can you find a human capable of keeping the wheels turning? Is there a human being capable of leading mankind?"

Crow smiled thinly. And continued working.

SKELETONS OF SPACE

By JAMES McKIMMEY, Jr.

Time lost form. Day turned into night. And Tiege and Mallon found themselves crawling endlessly 'round their battered rocket searching...searching for just one way to stem that mad, insatiable, swarming insect horde.

THE rocket was a splintered, twisted wreck. Bret Tiege and Sidny Mallon stood beside it and looked around at the terrain of the planet. As far as they could see, in every direction, they found nothing but the yellowish sand. A light breeze touched their faces and the sun of this system was not too intense, but still, there was nothing to see but the sand.

"Damn it," said Tiege. "If I ever take another one of these rotten exploratory assignments, I'll have myself examined by the psychos."

Mallon, a light-haired man with bright blue eyes, let a shadow of a grin touch his lips and looked very small and young beside the tall, dark Tiege.

"And if I ever do take another one of these assignments," Tiege went on bitterly, "I'll make sure the man I go with knows how to handle a rocket!"

Mallon turned quickly. "Ah, listen, Bret. You know that wasn't my fault. You can't fly a rocket all over the entire system and expect it to stay like new, you know. We should've gone back a hell of a long time ago."

"All right, all right," Tiege snapped and strode back to the rocket.

He looked down at the hull, partly jambed into the sand, and up at the rest of the ship, crumpled and split in a dozen gaping holes. He kicked at a bubble-shaped port window which had been wrenched from its frame and now hung by one fine screw. It fell to the sand and rolled a few feet to a stop.

They were damned lucky to step out of it, Tiege decided. But then he'd been lucky before. It really hadn't been Mallon's fault. They should have gone back before this. But

when Tiege took on these assignments he had a reputation to uphold. He had to do a better job, be tougher, stronger, wilder than anyone else in the entire System Unit.

He'd had to fight Mallon's whimpering to return, for the last month. Tiege didn't mind a weaker man with him. He demanded it, in fact. But Mallon was beginning to play on his nerves. He was like a child with his emotional ups and downs.

Mallon followed him to the rocket. "I can fix the radio in a few hours, and then all we have to do is wait. We've got plenty of water and food. What the hell, huh, Bret?"

"Yeah," Tiege said. "What the hell's a month of waiting on a stinking desert with a bleeding infant on your hands?"

"Now, listen, Bret. You don't have to talk that way. You've got no reason—"

"Okay!" Tiege snapped. "Take it easy." He turned to the younger man. "I'm going to tell you now, Mallon, while I still feel like it. You've got to get tougher than you are to get along. You let things get under your skin. You let the way I hammer you get on your nerves. You've got to build yourself some armor, and you've got to learn how to depend on yourself. If you want something, damn it, you've got to get it, not wait around for somebody to give it to you. You've got to be tough and cruel and selfish, Mallon, and take what you want!"

Mallon stood listening, watching the sand at his feet, and Tiege could see the faint flush in the man's pale face.

MALLON was embarrassed, Tiege knew, because what he'd told the man was the truth—Mallon *was* weak and dependent. But, too, he knew Mallon was pleased that Bret Tiege was talking to him this way,



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giving him advice, even worrying whether or not Mallon lived or died. Well, Tiege didn't, as a matter of fact. He was only protecting himself, hoping that Mallon might find some guts and because of it, leave him alone.

"Yeah, you're right," Mallon was saying. "I appreciate it, Bret, what you said. I—"

"Let's get started," Tiege growled.

The stretch of cabin beneath the long lucid visual dome was fairly intact. The instrument panel was smashed, but the radio itself hadn't been damaged too badly. Mallon could fix it in time. They could live in the cabin by closing off one end with some of the broken interior paneling.

The entire country, Tiege observed, looking around again, was sand. There wasn't another solitary thing in sight. So there would be nothing to fear. They should handle it easily until the rescue ship arrived. All he had to do was put up with Mallon.

"How about something to eat?" Mallon said, standing inside the wreckage. He held up a can of sealed food.

You could count on Mallon for two things. First, he could always bend his mind away from the task at hand. He seemed to be able to try a dozen different directions all at once, but he could never follow one line. Second, if he could offer something to Tiege, give him something, to show how really friendly a fellow Mallon was, he would do that. It didn't make any difference whether it was Mallon's own possession that he was offering. Or, as in this case, the food they both shared. He had to try to make it look like he was doing Tiege a favor.

"All right," Tiege said tiredly. "We'll have something to eat."

Mallon nodded, grinning, and began breaking the seal of the container. The lid came off with a hiss, and then, suddenly, it happened.

The sand around them seemed to come alive. There was a cruel angry buzzing in the air that increased until it was a whining scream against their ears.

From out of the yellowish sand came millions of tiny black insects. They clouded the air and, like a darting funnel, they swept into the opened can of food. From all around they multiplied, until the entire area around and inside the ship was thick with

them. Tiege cursed and flailed his arms, feeling them, hearing them.

Then, just as suddenly, they were gone, spreading out quickly and disappearing into the sand.

Tiege looked at Mallon who was standing frozen, the can in his hands, his eyes wide and frightened.

"Hell," Tiege said.

Mallon shook his head quickly and looked at the food can. He peeled the lid back. The can was empty, and the inside shown clear and shiny as though it had been scoured clean.

Tiege stepped over and looked at the can. He took it out of Mallon's hands and threw it out on the sand. "Well, we're not alone after all," he said. He held out his hand. "Give me another can."

Mallon, still looking frightened, bent over and picked up a new small container.

Tiege took it and held it in his hand. Then he twisted the seal until there was the hiss again. The air turned black and the whine rose like a wild siren. Then the insects were gone and there was silence, and Tiege held another empty can in his hands.

It came to Tiege quickly and with impact. He could see the knowledge was in Mallon, too, by the look on the man's face. Unless they could find protection from the waiting swarms of insects, their food was useless.

Mallon wiped a nervous hand across his face. "That's enough to drive you crazy, those damn things."

"They don't bother us, anyway," Tiege said.

"No. Just our food is all. Just our food!"

Tiege stood, watching the panic in Mallon's eyes. The man was reacting the way Tiege thought he would. You couldn't count on a man like that, Tiege told himself, if something went wrong. He was all right, to a point. After that he'd probably fall apart like a splintered vase.

"Don't go to pieces," Tiege said sarcastically. "We might figure something out."

Mallon blinked and shifted his feet. "Well, we better figure it out before we starve to death."

"Are you starving to death?" Tiege asked coldly.

Mallon blinked again and didn't answer.

"What I want to know," Tiege said,

looking at the sand around them, "is what they want and what they don't want."

"Food, man, food," Mallon said. "They want food!"

"All right," Tiege snapped, "why didn't they attack us? Aren't we food?"

Tiege could see Mallon shiver.

"Listen," Mallon said loudly, "you think this is so damn funny. You'll think it's funny when you start feeling your stomach scrape together."

Tiege walked away and picked up the largest of the two cans. It was labeled "pork." He examined the smaller can. This one had contained olives. "Pork and olives," he said. "What else have we got, Mallon?"

"What are we going to do, give those damn bugs our whole supply?"

"What else have we got?" Tiege repeated, his voice cracking like the snap of a whip.

Mallon began digging through the supply locker, whose contents had been jumbled by the impact of the crash. "Lettuce," Mallon shouted angrily, "bacon, cheese, chocolate . . ."

"Give me the chocolate," Tiege said.

Mallon turned and flipped a small can of chocolate to Tiege.

Tiege ripped at the seal and tossed the can away. The black funnel found the container in mid-air, sending the vicious whine into their ears. The air was suddenly clear and Tiege walked over and picked up the can. Empty.

"Give me the cheese," Tiege said.

"Not again," Mallon complained. "They'll drive us crazy, I told you. That whining noise they make, I—"

Tiege took a step forward and Mallon dug into the cans. He tossed a cheese container to Mallon and licked his lips, his eyes blinking.

Tiege tore away the seal and a second later looked into a clean empty can.

"They're not particular what they eat, are they?" Tiege asked.

"What are we going to do?" Mallon rubbed his hands on his uniform.

"I'd say you'd better get the radio fixed so we can get out of here."

"But a month, it'll take them a month to get us off of this planet! We can't go for a month with no food!"

3—Planet—May

"Fix the radio, Mallon!" Tiege's temper was rising inside of him because he could feel the panic in himself. The way Mallon showed the fright, in his eyes and hands, in the way his voice was getting higher and louder, was fanning Tiege's own fear. And he didn't want to show it or believe in it.

Tiege fitted his palms against his holster belt. "Mallon?" he said.

Mallon turned quickly and bent down beside the radio, Tiege could see the man's fingers trembling as they fumbled with the broken parts.

TIEGE climbed back onto the floor of the cabin, back of Mallon, and sat down. He couldn't stay out there on the sand, knowing the insects were lying beneath his feet, waiting. He hated himself for this fear, but these insects were different. This was no enemy you could fight or kill. They were all around you, and you couldn't even see them until they had caused their damage.

He leaned back against the wall of the cabin, closing his eyes to force the calmness back into his system. He tried to think. If the things were so damned hungry, why didn't they attack human flesh? Tiege looked at the skin of his hand. He moved the fingers, closing them, opening them.

The only answer was because he and Mallon were alive. The food in the containers was all dead.

He looked at his hand again. It would be a moot question for the time being. He wasn't going to cut off a finger to find out if they'd go after that. He laughed quietly. His calm was coming back to him.

He watched Mallon turn quickly. "What's the matter?" Mallon said, his words tumbling so fast in his nervousness that he was stuttering. "What are you laughing at?"

"I just figured it out," Tiege said, smiling. "They don't want live meat. They want dead meat. I figured out, to prove it, I'd have to either cut off one of my fingers, or one of yours."

"Damn you," Mallon said. His face had gone white.

"All right," Tiege said quietly. "Just fix the radio."

Mallon went back to the radio, his lips thin, his hands shaking.

Tiege stood up and picked up one of the

emergency canteens from the back of the cabin. Slowly, he unlocked the cap. Nothing happened. At least, he told himself, they would have water.

His brain was functioning steadily now, without fear or panic, and he was almost happy with the circumstances. A new problem that involved the possibility of destruction was to Tiege like liquor to a drunk. He could feel the first effects of it, raking his nerves, and then there was the good familiar glow that made him come alive. He could test the steel that he had tried to make of himself for the past fifteen years.

The sound of Mallon's work cut the silence of the desert and swept over the yellowish sand. Tiege stood silent, thinking.

The only way they could consume the food would be to construct some kind of protective covering about them long enough to eat it. He reached into one of the bunks built alongside the cabin and jerked out a nylon sheet. He felt the material between his fingers.

It was finely woven and tough. Everything they wore or carried was made of non-vegetable or non-animal material. Their uniforms, their gun belts and holsters. Leather, Tiege reasoned, would have long since disappeared under the barrage of the black swarm. He carried the sheet to the open front of the cabin. "Mallon," he said, "give me a hand."

Mallon dropped his tools and stood up. He looked at Tiege resentfully.

"I'm going to try to open a can underneath this sheet. Help me wrap up inside of it." He took one of the smaller cans of pork from the locker and began wrapping the sheet around himself.

He instructed Mallon to tie the ends tightly, at his feet and at his head, and as he stretched out on the cabin floor inside the airless prison of the sheet, he felt the sweat begin to roll down his face.

Slowly he put his fingers on the seal. Then he ripped it loose and tore a piece of meat from the can. There was a shuddering movement around him and the whining drone was splitting his ear drums. He jambed the meat into his mouth and suddenly he was enveloped by the black swarm of insects.

They went into his mouth, and he could feel the humming movement against his

tongue and throat. He screamed and fought at the sheet. All at once there was nothing but himself, swearing, fighting. The food was gone from the can and his mouth.

Mallon was tearing the sheet off of him and Tiege lay trembling on the floor.

Mallon's face was white again, and he wiped at his forehead in his jerking movement.

Tiege fought the trembling inside himself and sat up slowly. "Get back to the radio," he said to Mallon hoarsely. His eyes were narrow and bright.

Mallon licked his lips and returned to the broken radio.

Tiege sat unmoving on the cabin floor, staring out at the sand around them. The sun hung on the horizon, a large burning globe, and then dropped from sight. The light dimmed and the breeze began to cool.

TIEGE began to notice his hunger. He had not been without food long enough to know real hunger, but the knowledge of the impossibility of eating turned his mind to it.

He stood up and found the canteen. The water was cold against his insides and he drank until he could hold no more. He was hungrier than before.

Mallon was still working in the dimming light, and Tiege saw the man finally straighten.

"Okay!" Mallon said excitedly, "I've got it fixed!" He stood there, a grin on his face, as though waiting for Tiege to smile at him and slap him on the back, to tell him what a nice job he'd done.

Tiege stood, hard-eyed, watching Mallon's expectant grin. "What are we going to do, string a May pole?" Tiege said. "If it's fixed, use it."

Mallon's grin faded as though a whip had been slashed across his face. He bent again to the radio.

Tiege paced the cabin floor. He tried to make his mind turn the problem over in systematic precision, but all he could think about was food. There had to be some way. A larger cover, one that would allow them to stay inside until even the digestion had taken place, would be the only answer. Tiege could still remember the feeling of the insects inside his mouth, and he fought the

shudder that started in his body.

He yanked open the first-aid cabinet and examined the rolls of adhesive tape, dozens of foil-wrapped spools of soft nylon ready for adhesion by pre-treated chemical coating and simple pressure. Then he closed the door and turned to Mallon, who had come up beside him.

Mallon's face was bright and hopeful. "I did it, Bret. I got the signal to the first relay!"

"All right," Tiege said.

"We've got that much whipped, anyway," Mallon said enthusiastically. "Now what do we do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"That's right," Tiege said. "Sleep, that's all."

"Sleep? How the hell can we sleep, when—"

Tiege took off his helmet and threw it on the floor. "We'll seal up this cabin in the morning. We'll seal it up so tight those stinking bugs can't get inside and then we'll eat. In the meantime, we'll sleep."

"Yeah," Mallon said, nodding in the darkness. "Sure, Bret."

Tiege crawled onto the lower bunk and pulled a cover over him. If he'd told Mallon they were going to dig through the planet and come up on the other side where there weren't any insects, Mallon would go along with it—so long as Tiege used a kindly tone in his voice, or smiled at the man, or patted him on the back.

Tiege could hear Mallon crawling into the upper bunk. "You know," Tiege could hear Mallon saying, "that's a hell of a good idea, Bret. Huh?"

Tiege stared silently into the darkness.

"I mean, we've got it all planned out now, and I've got the radio fixed and the signal in. We'll lick the hell out of this thing, huh?"

Tiege was still silent. He could tell by the sound of Mallon's voice that the man was leaning over the side of the bunk. "That's right, isn't it, Bret?" Mallon asked. "Together, we'll really lick hell out of this thing, huh?"

Tiege stretched his legs. "You're a weak punk, Mallon."

Then there was the quiet of the night

and the stars showing in the sky. Tiege fell asleep.

THEY awoke early. Tiege's mouth was dry and his stomach felt empty. He swung out of his bunk and put on his helmet. He straightened himself, testing his muscles and he slapped the side of Mallon's bunk.

"All right, Mallon. Let's get started."

There was the faint light of early morning and the air was still cold. Tiege moved swiftly.

Together, they flattened bent metals and pried loose paneling from the area back of the cabin. They worked steadily and silently, fitting, hammering, testing. By noon, they had the front section of the cabin closed. They kept the food locker and oxygen tubes and water inside and began sealing the cracks between the make-shift sections of wall with the tape from the first aid cabinet.

The transparent dome overhead let in sufficient light and more than sufficient heat. The cabin was becoming airless and hot. Sweat crawled into Tiege's eyes and he took off his helmet and jacket. He could feel his energy draining and his movements becoming slower.

Mallon, silent and sullen, kept his eyes away from Tiege and worked methodically.

By late afternoon, they had sealed every visible opening. Tiege wiped his forehead and said, "Let's try it."

Mallon lifted out a large can of meat.

"A small one, a small one," Tiege said, feeling his anger for the other man rise up suddenly so that his face flushed and his fingers tightened into fists. He would have to be careful, he told himself, to hold onto his nerves.

Mallon found a smaller container and handed it to Tiege. Tiege held the can and quick dread rushed through him. He could feel the insects, as they had surrounded him in the sheet, and the buzzing whine was a vivid memory. He set his teeth and yanked the seal.

The insects rushed through a hundred openings, swarming into the cabin. The air turned black and Tiege felt himself yelling and choking. He fought at the mass around his face, and over the rising buzzing, he could hear Mallon shrieking, clawing at the

end of the cabin. He reached blindly, found the man's arm, and threw him back.

Then the cabin was empty of the black horde, Mallon lay sprawled on the floor, his eyes wild.

"You stupid bastard," Tiege shouted. "Keep your hands off that wall!"

"But those things. Those horrible damned things!"

"You open this cabin up, Mallon, I'll kill you!"

Mallon lay shaking on the floor.

Tiege held himself motionless until the fury began to drain out of him. "Let's find the holes," he snapped and began going over the walls of the cabin again, inch by inch.

There were, Tiege found, countless cracks and openings, barely visible to the eyes. He worked relentlessly, finding his own fingers shaking as he sealed the tape over the holes. He was tired, and his nerves were singing. He was hungry.

Light was fading outside and the interior of the cabin was darkening. Mallon stopped working and stood in the center of the cubicle.

"Well," said Tiege. He took a food container from the locker.

Mallon shook his head, his eyes frightened.

Tiege closed his eyes and tore the seal. There was a fraction of a moment when the cabin was empty and only the sudden sound of the insects hitting the outside of the walls. The dome above was darkened and the light cut out. Then the noise was inside the cabin and a thin streak of black cut across the cubicle, then another, and another.

Mallon remained against the bunks, his hands out, gripping the sides. He looked like a man staked to a cross.

"We're going to starve," he began, his voice high and trembling. "Do you hear? We're going to starve!"

Tiege, his eyes thin, began moving across the cabin, fighting to keep the weakness out of his knees.

Mallon was chanting. "Starve, like animals, we'll starve, starve . . ."

Tiege struck him across the mouth and Mallon fell along the sides of the bunk to the floor. Tiege stood over him, hands

clenched, and Mallon was only a dark shape, crumpled at his feet and there was no more sound from the man.

Mallon was still on the floor when light came through the dome. He lay on his back, eyes wide, lips moving silently.

Tiege looked at the man and the disgust made him push out of the bunk. He stood swaying over the smaller man and kicked at Mallon's boots. Mallon rolled his head. Tiege kicked again. And Mallon began to pull himself up.

They went over the entire cabin again. Painstakingly, running their fingers along surfaces, cupping the light out with their hands to find the deadly cracks.

Tiege tried another container, and the swarm made him want to kick and scream the way Mallon did.

He tried again and again, and the food diminished. Still there were faint openings that their eyes could not find, and the insects continued to make their crazing attack. Time lost form. Day turned into night, and Tiege found himself crawling along the patched wall in total darkness, searching, searching, without even knowing what he was doing or why. He remained on the floor, shivering with sudden chills and feeling his forehead burn. Between fitful stretches of sleep, he listened to the monotonous sobbing of Mallon.

Sunlight showered the cabin, and Tiege lay looking up through the dome at the bright sky. His forehead was like fire and his body shook with uncontrollable spasms. There was a knifing pain in his stomach, and he pushed at it with his hands. His eyes were bright and his mouth was like parched paper.

Then he climbed to his feet. He examined the food locker. There were three cans left. He did not even know what they contained. He tried to remember when he had made the last test. He couldn't. All that was in his brain was the black maddening swarms and suffocating fight, then the incessant search, inch after inch, of the faulty wall.

He took the three cans and placed them in the middle of the cabin. He looked at Mallon, and it was difficult to speak because the saliva was scarce in his mouth and thick, and water would no longer help. "There it is," he said. "All that's left."

Mallon stared at the cans without speaking.

Slowly, Tiege tore a seal.

Nothing happened. The dome blackened above and the sound of insects hitting the walls was there, but there was no swarm.

Mallon began crawling jerkily toward the can Tiege held.

Tiege waited motionless and searched the wall. Mallon reached for the can, and suddenly a black line darted across the cabin. Then another, and the cabin was turning black again and Tiege's ears were bursting with the splitting whine.

Mallon lay sobbing, holding the empty can in his hands.

The insects had gone.

Tiege began crawling to the point where he had seen the first swarm enter. He fumbled at the dwindling tape and fortified the patchwork. He made his way back to the two remaining cans and Mallon.

He tore another seal. Again he waited, holding the can away from Mallon's clutching fingers. The air was clear. One, two, three seconds. Then the fine darting black line and the droning increased. The air became a living angry thing, and the second can was empty.

Tiege crawled to the other side of the wall and worked at the remaining patch. His fingers were numb and his eyes were beginning to burn so that he could barely see to work. Finally he turned and began to crawl back to the last can.

He looked into the muzzle of Mallon's gun.

Mallon held the last can, open, in one shaking hand, and with his other hand, held the gun tight against his side to keep it steady.

When Mallon spoke his words were thick and hard to understand. "You taught me, Tiege. You said, you've got to be tough and cruel. You said, you've got to be selfish," Mallon's lips cracked when he grinned and his eyes were fire-bright.

Tiege froze, his eyes watchful slits. "Put the gun down, Mallon."

Mallon shook his head. "Kill you."

"You haven't got the guts," Tiege whispered. "I didn't teach you anything, Mallon,

because there's nothing in you to teach. You're just a weak sniveling coward with no guts."

"Kill you," Mallon repeated, and he began to back away, holding tight to the gun and the food can. His eyes danced wildly.

"No," Tiege said hoarsely. "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you and eat the food in that can myself. If that won't hold me, I'll start in on you. Mallon? Did you hear me? I'll start in on you!"

Mallon's face twitched and the gun twitched out of his hands. The food can clattered to the floor. "No, listen, Bret," he said crazily. "Listen, you and me, together . . ."

Tiege felt his own gun in his hands and he held it out, aiming carefully.

Mallon shook his head, back and forth, his whole body quivering, his mouth moving soundlessly.

Tiege looked down the sights, and the hate for the wild, shaking man flowed through him like acid. The insects, the food, nothing was important in that instant, only the hate. He squeezed the trigger. Mallon stared at him, dazed. Tiege fired again and again. Six times. And when the echoes had disappeared, Mallon lay on the floor like a puppet whose strings had broken.

Tiege watched then, while the six holes punched neatly through the wall behind Mallon turned black. He heard the screaming drone, and the air around him was alive.

When the drone was gone and the air was clear, he looked for a long time at the empty can and the skeleton at the other end of the cabin. A skeleton with white bones that glistened in the sunlight flowing through the dome.

Suddenly, he threw his gun at the grinning bone face.

Then he lay back against the wall. He had a double choice. He could wait while the hunger shrunk the life out of him until he was dead and had become another glistening skeleton. Or he could retrieve his gun and become another glistening skeleton, within seconds. He lay there, eyes half-closed, working his fingers uselessly, deciding.





THE LAND BEYOND THE FLAME

By EVELYN GOLDSTEIN

*Beyond the Flame Barrier lay knowledge of the
Originals. Long it stretched from horizon to
horizon, a thin stream of living light; a thin path
of peril for Allyn the Numan.*

CAUTIOUSLY Allyn the Numan moved to the edge of the outcropping rocks, black cloak swirling hip length about his lean seven foot figure. His close cropped silver hair was bare so that he had to shade his silver eyes against the shimmering waste ahead.

At his back, the jagged rocks rose and fused into wild hills. Before him stretched the Graysand Desert, cruel with heat and treacherous sands. And, shrill in the fiery air, came the squeals of the rat pack.

Giant carnivores, shaggy and foul-breathed, their wicked claws could tear a man fleshless. Fetid poison lay in the bite from their sharp yellow teeth, and those teeth were bared now in raging anticipation.

They were on the kill! Hunger in their voices and lust. And their gray bodies, a pollution on the landscape, surged after a desperate prey.

What did they pursue? Allyn strained to see.

An Olman!

The sun blazed on the sweat of the mighty chest heaving with exertion. Like all the males of that savage group he was naked, save for a loincloth, and his bronzed corded arms swung in tempo with his pumping feet. With each step, he left a bloody trail which spurred the rats to further frenzy.

The blood loss told! He fell! But, even as he went down, he spun on his back, teeth bared, and the burning wind carried his fierce yell of defiance.

The rodents went mad with triumph. They leapt for the kill.

Without thinking Allyn brought his flame gun from its holster. Lances of bright death seared the gray ranks. Squeals died. The rats swerved from the fallen man, scattered. Retreat was a panic stampede. And soon their shrilling faded in the distance.

The prone man twisted to hands and knees to face his rescuer. Hope was bright in his eyes. But then he saw Allyn. Elation became horror.

"*Numan!*" It was a despairing cry. Then he fainted.

Allyn hastened across the gray sands. Hefting the unconscious man to his shoulders he staggered toward the rocks. In a crevice, sheltered by a natural ledge, he deposited his burden, and set about examining the gashed thigh. The wound was more painful than serious, and he ripped a strip from the lining of his cloak to bind it tight and stop the blood flow. He had barely finished when the young savage stirred.

Allyn tensed, watchful, flame gun ready.

He saw the dark eyes open, not sleepy, but with full awareness, as with a wild beast. The well conditioned muscles tightened.

"Don't move!" Allyn aimed the gun.

The prone man froze. He well knew the power of the weapon. The taut muscles did not relax, but remained arrested, waiting for one unguarded instant to spring at the other's throat.

"Don't be alarmed," the Numan reassured, "I won't hurt you."

No sign that the other heard. But in the rigid muscles, distrust was plain.

"Try getting up—but slowly. You've lost a lot of blood."

The Olman rose with easy grace. As he did he noticed the dressing on his leg, and wild hate flamed his face.

"Why didn't you let the rats finish me! It would have been cleaner than death in your experimental camps."

"I didn't save you for the camps. You're free to return to your kinsmen."

The youth stared. "I never heard of mercy from a Numan," he said suspiciously. "A twenty-year-old like me would last a long time in the hands of the vivisectionists of your people."

Pain furrowed Allyn's lean face. "They are no longer my people," he whispered, "I'm an outcast."

His beautiful silver head drooped wearily. He had rebelled, flaunted the law of the logicians, even done the supreme crime. . . .

"I have struck a logician," he said, filled with the horror of his own deed. "The Gyro-Gard are hunting me." Apprehensively the two glanced skyward. But there was no dreaded black craft to be seen.

The Olman was curious. "Why did you strike your Elder?"

"For my sister, Aleena."

The Olman spat a furious epithet. "No Numan has a sister! Do you think I'm a fool! It is told around our council fires that your women die at the birth of their first child. You cannot have a sister! You are lying!"

Allyn's head lifted proudly. "A Numan does not lie! Aleena and I are twin—a phenomenon among my people. It was decreed that we would mate to pass multiple births on through our progeny. But, when the day of union was set, I refused, know-

ing that within the year of conception Aleena would die."

His head bowed recalling his own heresy. "Metas, our Chief Logician himself came to syko me. He told me I was a throwback, capable of emotions like an Olman." He shuddered with distaste that brought an angry growl from the Olman's throat. Allyn did not notice. "Metas decreed hypno for me."

"Hypno?"

"Control of the mind, so I would have taken Aleena through no volition of my own."

The Olman leaned forward eagerly: "Tell us how to storm the Nyloplast dome that surrounds your city. My kinfolk and I will crush your Logicians and get back your Aleena."

Allyn looked at him in horror: "Do you think even if I could I would betray Numan into the hands of beasts?"

The young savage drew back. His face became hard in bitter lines, and for a moment his hand flashed to his belt, but his knife was rusting in the vitals of a rat.

"Beast?" his mouth twisted in hatred.

"I—Keeven—am nothing but a beast to you."

Allyn was bewildered by the other's emotion. The sliver brows drew together in perplexity. Numen were dispassionate, and the Olman's torrent of feeling was totally new to him.

Whatever he might have said was never uttered. Out of the sky came the drone of a motor.

"Gyro-gard!" Keeven exclaimed. He crouched like a cat-thing moving fluid under the shelter of the rock ledge. Heart hammering, Allyn leapt down beside him. Dry-throated, cramped, they heard the motor come closer, then fade away in the distance.

"That was close," Allyn said as they came out of concealment. "The closest they've come yet. They're widening the area of search." He turned to the other. "Leave me quickly. I can only bring you disaster."

It was Keeven's turn to be perplexed. "I confess I don't understand you. You are a Numan, but you are different. What do they call you, Numan?"

"Allyn."

"Allyn, you saved my life. For your good

turn my people will shelter you now. When the chase dies down you can leave us."

Live with the beast-men? Allyn started to decline but Keeven pointed out, "If you travel without me you will be hunted both by your people and mine."

There was logic in his words. "All right," he agreed, "I will go to your people."

THEIR path lay upward into the somber outjutting hills. Keeven was a tireless traveler, but Allyn, with the endurance of the Numen, followed easily. The day paled, and shadows lengthened on the rocks when they came through a narrow path into the cup of hills where grass grew, and the land was fertile for crops.

Several times Keeven stopped, and stood, as though listening. Once Allyn said impatiently: "I don't hear anything."

"That's just it." Keeven's face was gray. "We don't hear anything." The words gave voice to his fear. He began to run. And Allyn ran behind him. Scrambling over boulders. Leaping over fallen stumps. Down they faced to the site of the village.

No sound greeted them. And there was no hint of movement.

At the first house Keeven braked to a halt. Doors were torn away from the wood shelters, as were the tanned skins over the mouths of the caves. All about, the grass was blackened with fire, and no crops would sprout this year in the deep burned earth.

In anguish Keeven rushed from door to door, calling the names of people who had lived there. His voice keened higher with despair at each empty dwelling. Slowly Allyn followed. His own throat was tightening at the other's shock and grief.

There were half prepared meals. In one hut a crude cradle swayed with the wind of their passing—empty. . . .

The breeze flapped the skins, and a rude door creaked where it hung bound with rawhide to the lintel.

Slowly the futility of calling struck Keeven. He turned. His hard face was drawn and bloodless.

"Gone," he whispered. "Nothing. No one left."

As though in mockery, a call sounded from the hills. They wheeled in shock, eyes

to the rocks, straining against the dusk. A figure scrambled toward the blackened clearing.

It was a girl!

She ran to Keeven. Threw herself in his arms. "Keeven! Oh, Keeven, I thought I was the only one left!"

"Marva!" Into her hair he stammered, "H—How did you escape."

"I was in the hills for water when the gyros came." Her voice was broken with wild sobs, "I heard the commotion and saw the flames. I hid all this time. Even when the gyros went away. I hid till—I till I heard you calling."

Allyn watched how Keeven patted the soft bare shoulders, and stroked the tumble of silken hair that was so black it seemed blue. A stirring of strange passion went through him. His heart stumbled and raced. He had the warped mad urge to tear the girl away from the youth, to study her face, twine that hair round and round his lean long fingers. He stood like a rock, holding back churning emotions.

Metas was right! Over and over the bitter thought claimed him. Metas had known! Beneath the generations of logic that had bred him, lay a core of savagery. Years it had slumbered. Now it claimed him.

He must have made a sound. The girl whirled. Her eyes were great and dark, her skin rose over dusk. But now the rose-color fled, so that her wide gaze seemed black with terror and loathing.

UNDER that gaze Allyn felt whipped. For the first time he felt shame—shame for himself and for all Numen. Shame that they had caged these people, torn them, bled and killed them. All in the name of science! Experiment was survival! The Logicians had made it holy. The mirror of the girl's eyes told him what Numen were. Monsters!

She shivered. Drew back against Keeven. Her slim body, bare armed, bare legged in the brief skin garment, trembled against the young savage.

"Don't be afraid," he soothed. "This Numan is a friend." Briefly he recounted his experiences since leaving camp, till the terror left her face. Then he said to Allyn: "This is my sister, Marva."

"Keeven," she tugged at his hand. "We must get away from here. The Gyro-Gard have been circling all day."

The Olman's laugh was mirthless: "Go? Where?"

"Come with me," Allyn said impulsively. "I am going to the Forbidden Area. I am going to cross the Flame Barrier."

Even the wind stopped at the fearsome words. They shrank back from him.

"No one can approach the Flame!" Keeven cried. "It is death; death more terrible than by your vivisectionists."

Marva whispered; "It is taboo. It changes you into some monstrous thing!"

Allyn's straight mouth set. "Nevertheless I must go. It is told that beyond the Flame lies the knowledge of the Originals. Perhaps it will teach how to save our women from death in childbirth. It's my only hope of saving Aleena."

Thoughtfully Keeven regarded him. "It has been said around our council fires that there will be found a weapon to shatter the Nyloplast dome. Perhaps," he mused, "I will find it in time to save my kinsmen from the knives."

He smote a mighty fist into his palm: "We will go with you, Numan. For hope may lie ahead but—" his glance swept around, "only death lies here."

With a keen bladed knife he secured from one of the caves Keeven mapped in the mud the trail they must take. At night Allyn would lead, for night and day were one to Numen eyes.

They traveled close upon each other's heels, holding their leader's cloak for guidance in the darkness. By dawn they reached a small cave. There they rested, well hidden from patrolling gyros. When they woke at noon they were fresh for the next step of their journey.

Descending the rocky slope they came to the thin line of trees that marked the beginning of the forest. This time Keeven took the lead with Marva close beside. Allyn, at the rear, watched the easy grace with which the girl moved. Her slender brown feet in hide moccasins touched lightly on the path, and her body was erect and lithe.

How different she was from the unobtrusive women he knew. Raised in humility

to men, kept in secluded quarters, they were trained only for the breeding day that would be the culmination of their lives. Aleena alone stood apart from other Nuwomen. Because theirs had been a sacred charge from birth they had been permitted to work together in the hydroponics labs.

"Aleena." He thought of her now, gentle, with luminous eyes fringed in long silver lashes. The sheen of her silver hair that hung waist length was dancing moonlight. Loneliness lay like hunger in him. Withdrawn from Aleena, hunted by his people, what madness lay in his desire to feed himself to a flaming radiance forbidden by all. Surely he should go back, return to his rightful destiny. Leave these unheard of companions—turn back on emotion that was bitter, hurting. . . .

Marva glanced over her shoulder at him. Her smile was sweet encouragement. Her lips were red and full. Desire was as red as that mouth! And Allyn knew he would never turn back!

They moved into the deeper woods, where the heavy lacing trees made a green roofing to shelter them from seekers of the sky. Keeven caught an animal emerging from its burrow. The brother and sister worked in quiet union skinning and cooking dinner. They were skilled in making fires without smoke.

Used to dehydrated foods, Allyn was amazed at the savoriness of this meat. He watched his companions lick the juices from their fingers, and did likewise. Then wiping his hands on leaves, he sank back with a sigh on the fragrant pine nettled ground, while they destroyed all evidence of their repast.

Nothing untoward happened that first day of their journey. At dusk of the second they camped at the bank of a rushing brook. Keeven waded downstream to spear fish. Marva sat on the bank bathing her feet in the fresh water while Allyn stood close by. She rose, and stepped on a sharp rock. With a small cry her hands flailed. She almost fell backwards into the stream. Allyn's arms shot out. He pulled her so that she fell against him.

He did not move. Nor she. She was warm, her body like sunheat. There was a fresh pine fragrance from her hair. She

came not as high as his shoulder. They were short, these Olmen, and she was not quite six foot. Her mouth was beneath his, full and red and hot as blood.

He kissed that mouth, tart, delicious as wild strawberries. And her arms went around him in savage response.

This was mad! Mad beyond any madness! This was passion beyond legends, forgotten by Numan, tabooed by Olman.

Close to his face, hers yearned. Still she drew away slowly, out of the circle of his arms. "This is forbidden!" she whispered. She touched her sweet curved breast, "It hammers like the warning drum of the village: 'Numan and Olman cannot mate. Numen are inhuman. Mating is impossible.'" Her voice broke.

Under the agony in her eyes his hands fell to his sides like stones. He did not stop her when she ran from him into the grove of trees. He stood there, shaken by desire and by the ingrained lesson of years—Olmen are beasts. A man does not mate with the beast!

THEY were a quiet trio that took up the journey later. If Keeven noticed he was always center man, he made no sign.

The woods were dense and Keeven's mighty arm hacked often with the sharp blade to clear their path. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the woods began to change.

"We approach the Forbidden Area," Keeven's words were tense.

It was very silent. Insect and bird life seemed to have tabooed these habits. The landscape became twisted and strange. Seemingly normal trees sprouted bizarre growths. Giant bushes of a red mold color grew side by side with stunted trees that barely reached their knees, yet seemed fantastically aged.

The trio moved closer together, ears strained for normal sounds that did not exist there. The suffering ground was bitter, and erupted into convulsions, as though ejecting the monstrosities it had nurtured. Their feet ached from the humped and hollowed path. There was no whisper of wind. Yet Allyn shivered. A cold, ancestral fear laid lean fingers on his dry throat.

Light made their faces wan when they came to the edge of the deformed woods.

Ahead was the narrow stretch of barren waste that led to the rotted wood paling. The paling was only token warning now, encircling the shunned and dreaded Forbidden Area.

Movement caught their eyes. Instinctively, they fell to earth, hardly breathing, watching.

Into their line of vision paced a Gard, flame gun in hand. Even as they watched another Gard paced in from the opposite direction.

Allyn's whisper was sick: "They've thrown a cordon around the Forbidden Area!"

Keeven caught a gleam on dark metal. "There's a gyro—to the left. Can you fly one?"

Allyn nodded. "It's basic training for all Numen. But what good does it do us? There are the Gards."

The Olman's smile was grim. "You have a gun," he reminded.

Allyn stared. Use his gun? On Numen? Flame his own people!

The other sensed his thoughts. "Give it to me then. I'll make good use of it."

There *had* to be another way. His restless eyes sought the clearing.

In that instant Keeven sprang. Muscular arms caught the surprised Numan, crushing him to the ground. Swift fingers plucked the gun from his side. Then Keeven was off, crouching, weapon leveled straight for Allyn's breast.

There was a shout from the Gard. The three had been discovered. Flames of warning seared the shrubbery about them and the Gard made a rush toward their concealment.

Cursing, Keeven spun, flame gun ready. Allyn lunged at him, and his lance of fire struck harmlessly into the ground ahead. The gun rolled from his grasp. He surged up, flung the Numan away, leapt for the weapon.

"STAND!" The command froze Allyn. They were surrounded.

Keeven moved. With swift animal reflexes he caught the nearest Gard in the belly with his dagger. Another rushed in. Keeven smashed his jaw with a mighty fist that felled the Gard instantly. By brute strength alone he might have fought to

freedom. But the numbers against him were too great. They beat him to the ground, using guns like clubs. Finally he lay still, blood from a dozen wounds irrigating the barren ground.

Marva flung herself beside him. Over the prone man her dark glance caught Allyn's. Her eyes were wet with tears. But accusation blazed from them. Betrayer! Betrayer! As loud as though she had shrieked it. Yet, no sound passed her bloodless lips.

"Marva." He took a step forward.

A scarlet cloaked Senior Gard moved between. "Come quietly. Metas wants you unharmed for hypno."

Two gards moved to either side and grasped Allyn's arms. As in a nightmare he let them take him.

They marched down the stretch of waste land to the waiting gyro. One of the Gard clambered into the cabin, slid into the pilot seat and adjusted dials on the instrument panel. As Allyn and the Senior came aboard the motor hummed, warming.

Keeven was flung unconscious through the door. They had put irons around his wrists and throat connected by chains that rattled as he rolled against the wall. Marva, similarly shackled, was thrown unceremoniously into the cabin. She rose, panther-lithe, and came to her brother's side. With fettered hands she tried to staunch the bleeding on his face, and softly cried his name.

The Senior turned in annoyance. "Stop your noise!"

Oblivious to all but her brother's need of aid she sobbed, "Keeven! Keeven, open your eyes!"

Grimly the Senior advanced upon her, gun-butt raised. He brought it smashing down.

Allyn sprang. He caught the Senior's lowering hand, and twisted it sharply back. The gun dropped while a scream of pain filled the cabin. Allyn stopped the cry with a chopping fist that felled the Gard.

The pilot came out of his seat to his superior's assistance. Allyn caught the movement through the corner of his eyes. Whirling he met the charge, and they thrashed to the floor.

The pilot was wiry and gripped Allyn's throat, cutting off air. He pounded the face above him with clenched fists but, inexor-

ably, the fingers tightened. Allyn's sight dimmed, and sound became distorted. The pilot felt him weaken, and shifted for a harder grip. In that respite Allyn drew his knees up, lashed out with his feet, sending the other floundering back. Before he could recover Allyn leaped forward, bringing his hands down in a rabbit punch that knocked the man unconscious.

Groggily Allyn rose. His wavering sights caught the red flutter of a cloak in the open door. He charged, head lowered, across the intervening space, caught an incoming Gard flush in mid-section, knocking him into his companions. Catching himself against the door, Allyn pulled back, snapping it shut.

Breathing hard he made unsteadily for the pilot seat. His long fingers moved over the dials of the control panel, and the craft rose smoothly into the air. He looked out the window, and saw the recovered Gard raising weapons against them. A spurt of flame missed the motor. The second was true to its target, but short. They were too high to be reached now. He saw the scarlet clad figures make for their gyros and he jabbed the dials for maximum speed and height.

"Bring the Senior's keys from his pouch," he told Marva over his shoulder, "and take their guns."

He heard her chains rattle as she moved, and his lips set.

IN A MOMENT she was beside him with the keys and guns. He set the dials to automatic, laid the guns on the co-pilot seat and turned to free her.

The irons fell from her wrists and throat. Where they had been the silken skin was angry red. Hard eyed he took the chains and snapped them on the unconscious Senior. He similarly released Keeven, who was beginning to stir, and fettered the pilot with his irons.

Back to the controls he went. From the view-plate he saw the Forbidden Area black and pock-marked below. Ahead, at the horizon, sky and earth pulsed gold-orange. The Barrier!

Nothing living had been so close before. **Long** it stretched, from horizon to horizon, **a thin stream of living light.**

They winged closer. Allyn felt his hands

grow clammy on the controls. *Inherent* terror sat leaden in his stomach. The whispered warnings of the elders, thought lost in childhood, came to weird life in his mind, making him want to turn, even back to the knives of the medics rather than face the strange glow ahead.

He half-turned the ship, and saw, like birds in the distance, the formations of Gyro-Gard.

"Allyn," Marva whispered, her voice a plea.

He turned his head. Her dark eyes begged him, and he moved the controls—straight ahead—to the light. . . .

His communication board glowed. Quickly he answered to see the black and scarlet robed Junior Gard on the visiscreen.

"Surrender!" was the cold command, "or you die in the flame!"

He glanced to the rear view-plate. Their pursuers hung in space, not to follow, but to bar retreat. There was no turning. . . .

He smiled grimly and snapped the switch to cut contact.

They were close now, close enough for Allyn to see the truth. There were no fires, as legend told. Perhaps once there had been a holocaust that pulsed toward the sky and ate of the earth, but now, in the canal, was only the residue, a radiation that reflected upward like heat shimmers.

He felt Marva's hand tremble on his, like a frightened butterfly. He caught that hand, pressed it convulsively to his lips, and then they were directly over the radiance.

The gyro bucked, and plunged. As a moth it fell toward the light. The shock flung them forward. He sensed Marva's fall, but had no time for thought, other than an involuntary reaching for the controls. He strained to right the possessed ship, working against the siren radiations that pulled it down.

Brightness was about them. Skins shown golden, eyes were dazzled.

The gyro resisted Allyn's manual commands. Fingers numb with the pull, he fought. Slowly the nose eased up, giving them a precious moment's gain. The gyro shuddered—a doomed thing. He coaxed it further, but again the nose dipped. And

again he brought it up! And then—abruptly—the pull was gone. The brilliance faded.

They were past the Barrier!

Astounded they looked at one another. Bereft of speech or comprehension they could only stare. Save for the swiftly fading light they were as before—unchanged, unscathed. And behind them the Barrier pulsed, with no sign of transgression.

"Am I different?" Marva whispered.

He shook his head mutely.

A hoarse exclamation turned them to the others in the cabin. They too were fully conscious and aware of the unbelievable thing that had happened. They too stared at themselves and at each other, and then they rose, the Numen unsteady in their chains, and scrambled for a look at what lay below.

The land was devastated. A twin to the Forbidden Area! Allyn thought he must be mad. Surely they had gone through! And there at the boundary mark was a rotted fence to mark off the Area before the waste land became mutilated forestry.

Everything was the same! Everything—but the Gyro-Gard were not there. . . .

THEN they saw the forest. It was not the same, not the one they had left. It was smaller and terminated in the muddy bank of a twisted river. On the opposite bank were scattered signs of habitation. But such habitation! The style was squat, the material was red oblong blocks set in rows upon each other.

There were grain fields. People working in the fields looked up at their passing, and evidenced excitement. People working in the open! Unsheltered by hills or caves!

Habitations became more frequent, and soon they flew over the square of a town. A town unprotected by a Nyloplast screen!

Allyn brought the aircraft lower. People were congregating in the square, gesticulating.

Allyn felt a stirring in his mind and, as plain as spoken words: "Come down. Land."

Hesitantly his fingers touched the controls. The thoughts in his brain were gentle, encouraging. He glanced at Marva. Her eyes were on the scene below, dreamy, lips

half parted. Behind her Keeven watched. There was eagerness in his face.

"It's safe," he said to Allyn's questioning glance. "I sense it. They are friendly."

Allyn felt it too. There was reassurance in the sight of people gathering, without fear, in an unprotected area. He brought the gyro to a landing in the cleared space of the square.

Nevertheless he took gun in hand when he came to the door. Cautiously he opened it.

And saw a sight beyond believing.

These people were an impossibility! Dark haired people with silver eyes—silver eyed people with vari-colored hair! A cross-breeding of Olmen and Numen! It was absurd! Inconceivable!

A path opened in the throng for a man who was obviously the leader. Like the others, he was an impossibility. He was tallest of all, with silver eyes and his hair was long and incredibly red. There was a red growth of hair on his chin where no Numan could grow hair.

"Welcome, strangers from beyond the Radiation. Welcome to York. I am Jon, Elder of York."

A thrill pierced Allyn. He stared at the smiling man, the smiling people behind him. No word had been spoken. Yet the words had been clear in his brain.

Telepaths!

Marva gasped as she realized this too. "Why they aren't even surprised to see us."

Jon's answer was benign. "We know why you are here. You have not closed your minds to us. We knew that someday the Radiation would be conquered. It was predicted that generations would become acclimated to radioactivity and eventually find it no different to their systems than air or water.

The thought was startling. But it gave the voyagers new hope. Perhaps they would here find a weapon to shatter the dome! Perhaps find new life for Nuwomen! Eagerly they came out of the gyro.

That was their error. The Senior-Gard hurled to the door, catching the handle with his chained hands. Keeven turned. Too late! The door slammed shut. The Olman struck at the door with fists like battering rams. To no avail. The gyro

hummed, lifted straight up, and went winging back toward the Barrier.

"They're going for reinforcements!" Agitated Allyn turned to Jon. "They'll return and attack your town."

The Elder's eyes twinkled. "There is no fear in York. Come to my dwelling. You will eat, and perhaps we can help you find what you seek."

He led the way to one of the strange red colored houses. Inside were fabric hangings over the windows, and fabric covering the floor and furniture. Allyn found it colorful, but too barbaric for his own austere taste. The Elder's mate, a silver haired woman with friendly blue eyes came to serve them.

Over the dishes of unfamiliar, but steamingly good food, Jon told of the ancient records preserved in the archives. The records told of the Originals of the Earth, a mighty but warlike race. Their terrible weapons had laced the earth with Bands of Radiation whose rays had changed the genes of mankind. The Numen were evolved from this. But many Originals had gone underground, in lead-impregnated shelters, staying there for countless generations. These were the Olmen, untouched by the first and strongest radiations.

In York, when the Olmen came again to the surface, they found the Numen decreasing as their women died in childbirth. At first there was antagonism between the groups but, on several occasions younger and more lustful Numen seized Olwomen, and from that mating it was discovered that only in cross-breeding was there survival.

"Our medics," the Elder explained, "have found that pure breeding of Numen created a negative factor in the blood of the unborn child. These negative antibodies erupted into the positive bloodstream of the mother, causing a jaundiced condition that affects the brain, leading to death in labor. Yet that same X-condition goes through transformation in the baby's system after the birth eruption so that, by the age of one year, the child is of positive blood. The weird X-factor holds true only in pure Numen breeding, seldom in cross-breeding."

But Keeven said moodily, "The Numen

will not believe this. They will come with their gyros to destroy York for hersey." He leaned across the table. "But there are weapons," he told the Elder. "Our legends say there are weapons to blast the Nyloplast dome. If we are the victors, Numen will have to listen."

Jon shook his head. "There are no weapons. They were destroyed by the Originals when they saw how they had destroyed themselves. But there is a way." He looked at Allyn. "It is a hard way—and dangerous, but perhaps you can do it."

And he told them.

HOURS later the three went back alone. Back to the lip of the radiant crater. In quietness they waited.

Toward dawn, like dark glistening moths out of the radiance, came a squadron of gyros. The leading craft spotted the figures below, dipped and came down. The others hovered in space, watchful. When the lead gyro landed, its door swung open and the red-cloaked Senior sprang out, flame gun ready.

The trio raised their arms in surrender. In a moment they were disarmed and hustled into the gyro. Their craft took the lead, rising high so the pull above the Barrier would be lessened. Even so it took master maneuvering to keep the ship steady till they were through.

Within the hour the Nyloplast dome came shimmering into view. At a signal over the communication system, the top-right section leading to the hangars slid open, and the gyros droned through. When they landed, the captives were prodded out of the hangar into the dazzling morning light reflected more brilliantly from the Nyloplast screen.

The hygienic whiteness of the city struck Allyn forcefully, as though he viewed it for the first time. They were led to a large, gleaming white building, into a high vaulted audience room. Straight ahead was the dais of marbleized seats where the Logicians met in Council. They sat there now, in full knowledge that Allyn would be in judgment before them. Metas, in skull cap and robes of judgment, sat in the center, regarding them with cold eyes.

Allyn lifted a hand in salute of respect.

The Council was silent.

Drawing a deep breath Allyn glanced once at Keeven and Marva who were flanked by watchful Gards. "I bring hope for our people," he began and quickly recounted his adventures past the Barrier.

The council listened dispassionately. With sinking heart Allyn realized his words were in vain. Numan belief in the animalism of Olman was too deep set. Mate with the beast! He saw the distaste in their expressions.

"You go beyond the bounds of taste," Metas warned. "There is only one reason you are still alive, Allyn. You must consent to the mating as decreed."

"I cannot. It would mean Aleena's death. Besides, I love Marva of the Olmen."

Horror rippled through the Council.

"Take them to the Syko Room!" Metas thundered. "I will administer Hypno myself."

They were dragged to a side door, down a narrow corridor, into the thick doored syko room. Allyn knew it well—those white walls cunningly concealing lights and mirrors to stun the mind. The padded tables with bands of iron. He was pushed to a table, strapped down, flat on his back. Marva started toward him, but was flung back by a Gard and forced to stand against the wall beside her brother, while their captors stood with flame guns ready.

The stony faced Chief Logician adjusted switches. Lights dimmed. Mirrors of various colors danced light spots before Allyn's eyes. He felt his senses swimming. He clenched his fists. Sweat stood out on his brow.

Metas leaned over him, soft voiced, soothing. Allyn's mind strained against the lure. There was something he had to remember—a lesson, important as life itself.

Oh, how the lights spun! If he could sleep! Sleep! The voice lured—sleep!

"Allyn! RESIST!" Marva's voice! Then a Gard's fist silenced her.

RESIST! The key. Jon's words: "They can't hypno you unless you already believe. Don't believe! Resist!"

Then he fought back. Against the soothing sibilance. Against the dancing lights. He turned his thoughts inward, to things of his childhood, to sights he had seen;

gray rats chasing a man; an empty cradle in an empty hut; Marva sweet in his arms, perfume in her hair. . . . And his teeth were clenched over his lips. The pain was cruel, relentless. His nails in his palms. Pain and memory to fight sleep!

And he won!

The full white light flashed on. The siren voices died. The promising lights were defeated. He blinked his tired, weighted eyes. And Metas stood there.

"You have not succumbed," the Logician whispered. His face was haggard with strain. "No one has ever resisted hypno."

He turned to one of the Gard: "Bring Aleena." Bitter-eyed he said to Allyn, "Perhaps your consent will come quicker if the medics work on your sister."

"Metas," Allyn strained against his bonds, "if you harm her I will bring the Dome crashing about us."

The Logician leaned forward: "Ah, then you found the weapons of the Originals."

"No, only the power of the York folk . . ."

"If they are so mighty, why did they not cross the Barrier?"

"They need a vessel." Allyn tried to explain: "It is like transmitting and receiving waves. They will transmit, and through me you will receive super-sonics that will shatter the dome."

Metas laughed.

IT WAS hopeless. Talk would never convince him. The door opened. They brought Aleena in. She started at sight of her brother, and her face went pale. But they pushed her roughly to a table and began to strap her down.

Allyn shut his eyes against the room, shut his ears against sound. He flung open his mind, cancelling all imagery, so the York folk could come through.

"Jon! Jon of York!" Out against the miles he hurled his voiceless plea. Over and over he called.

Gentle tendrils touched his brain. At first it was like a whisper. There were no words. But the whisper grew—grew to crescendo. It pulled at every nerve in his body, used every particle that composed him. He shook with vibrations. His body was a stringed weapon out of which poured

waves pitched too high for hearing. He was blind and deaf and mute—an empty vessel from which poured destruction.

He did not know how long he was gone out of the shell of his body. Slowly, gradually, his trembling stilled. Identity settled back inside him. Sound came back. Over and over, the soft sobbing of his name: "Allyn! Allyn!"

Hazily the room came to focus. Vague outlines of a face above him. Featureless, at first. Dark hair, all atumble, dark eyes aglisten with tears. His cheek was wet with her tears.

"Marva," his voice came hardly out of him.

Behind her the Logicians were grouped, white and sick of face.

"You cracked the dome!" Metas' words were hoarse ill past believing.

Cracked the dome!

He could have shouted. Had he been free he might have danced. He sent a voiceless thanks to the Redbearded Elder. "We've done it."

His eyes shone. "Now do you believe," he cried aloud, "now will you admit that York folk who could achieve such power could achieve survival. Give us a year," he asked, "a year of grace—a chance to prove

they were right."

The room was still.

The answer he asked was past all teachings, past ingrained traditions. Would they consent?

The whispered amongst themselves. Allyn's eyes went to Marva, to Keeven, and to the newly freed Aleena. Their glances on him were wide, troubled and hopeful, anxious and eager. They barely breathed as Metas came away from his group.

"Allyn," he said, "you are a throw-back so you would be willing to mate with an Olman. But who amongst us would do likewise?"

"I will!"

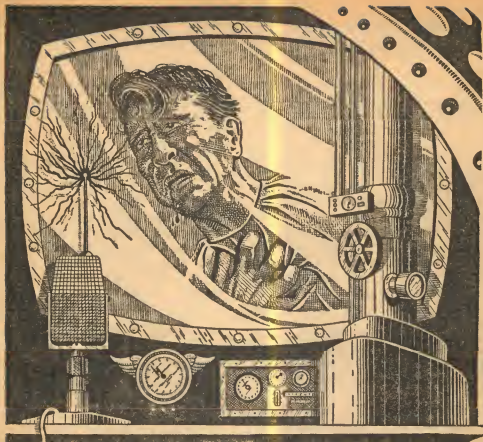
The answer, proud and unhesitating, came from Aleena. And her eyes were on Keeven. "I do not find Olmen as bestial as our tales have warned."

Keeven's breath caught. He leaned forward drinking sight of the filmy clad beauty as a wanderer at sight of his home.

Metas made a sign and Allyn smiled.

They had won. He could sleep now, and be well content. For, within the year, a twofold experiment would come to fruition. And a new era of brotherhood would come to earth, bringing the furthest star within the reach of Man.





THE PRIMUS CURSE

By BILL WESLEY

That the psychology boys had been right again, annoyed the veteran captain. He'd felt like a mechanical man all the time. Never would have believed he could send men to their death like that. And the ship! He might have lost everything!

“WELL, Skipper, we'll be in Mercury's com zone in ten hours, plus or minus a half.”

Captain Evan Grimes eyed his chief engineer sternly. “How'd you know I wouldn't have the recorder turned on, Manson? That could have cost you a week's pay.”

“Sorry, sir,” Bill Manson saluted, still smiling.

“I don't mean the salutation, you bone-head. It's been five years since the Service

banned the name Mercury for Primus, and I've heard it used at least three times on this trip.”

“I'll make out a voluntary on it.”

“Forget it. I don't like those spying recorders any more than you do, but I don't like to see a man throwing his money away either. Especially when he's on a job where he'll probably earn every dollar of it.”

Manson pulled a fade-away chair from its wall socket and pressed the green button.

He waited two seconds for the cushion to inflate, then relaxed in it. "So you really think it's going to be rough," he said casually.

Grimes swung his chair ninety degrees and studied the planet, Primus, looming ever larger on the television screen. There were small breaks in the cloud formations, but it was still too early to glimpse any of the compact little cities.

"We aren't the first group to tackle this mystery, you know, and we'd be hard put to prove we were the best, from what I've read of the reports."

The engineer scratched his carefully trimmed beard and didn't appear at all worried. "If you'd like to know how I feel about it," he grinned, "my wedding date's already set for next June."

The captain had to smile. "I attribute your optimism to your inexperience," he said. "Even assuming that we escape with our necks, what makes you think we'll have it cleared up before June? I've got a reputation for doing things the cautious way, you know."

Manson shrugged. "I've heard of that code they drum into you at Space Academy. Your ship is your life. Every speck of meteoric dust that sticks to its hide is your responsibility. And right along with the ship comes the crew. Each member a ten million dollar investment—not one hair of his head to be risked unnecessarily."

"You're a little inaccurate in the phraseology, but go on. What are you driving at?"

"Nothing special. That's all fine and dandy for escorting bug-hunters around Mars, but this is a combat mission. First one in a hundred years. Not a man in the Service has ever been on a combat mission. I'd give plenty to hear what's on the tape this time."

"What makes you think there is a tape?"

Manson pushed the red button on the chair and let it slide out from under him, deflating itself with a swoosh. "There's always a tape. This one should be a lulu. I won't be surprised to see you storm out of here in about nine hours with blood in your eye and X pistols hanging on both hips."

"And I won't be surprised to see you flying out of here head first in about two

seconds," Grimes shouted. "I'll accept your maximum estimate of ten and a half hours. That'll be soon enough to establish contact. Now get out."

Manson paused in the doorway. "It's just one forty and three," he said. "Shall I write in the journal that the engineer was commended for the fast trip?"

"We aren't in yet. All I said was get out."

The engineer scurried through the door, leaving behind a more pleased commander than he had been given reason to suspect.

One hundred and forty days to Primus! The boy had a right to gloat, Grimes thought. If it wasn't a top secret mission the trip would go into the record book.

He slid his desk into its wall socket and opened a camouflaged compartment alongside it by playing a complex tattoo with his fingers on the unmarked surface. He drew out a reel of plastic tape and a sealed envelope, then pushed the door gently, listening for the faint sound of the tumblers falling into place, locking it. He switched off the main light, leaving only a pale blue ceiling glow, and retired to his sleeping quarters.

No hurry on the tape—he was glad of that. Shouldn't take more than ten minutes. Plenty of time for a shower and a movie. Then the service could have his subconscious. At least they spared him those long-winded tapes he had heard about. A restless man sometimes had to take a sleeping pill to give the tape time to play itself out. Grimes had been around long to let it bother him that much, but he always felt a certain resentment when they handed him one of their psychological gimmicks.

What the devil could be on this one? The orders were the clearest he had ever received. Drastic, all right, but no room for misinterpretation. Here he was Number Three Commander in the service, and they didn't trust him to come in out of the rain. Maybe Manson was trying to drop a hint. Didn't think he was capable of leading a combat mission. Maybe the whole crew was uneasy.

A hard smile forced itself across his face. They'd know in the next fifteen or twenty hours who their leader was.

It was just one-forty and six when Grimes switched off his microfilm pro-

jector and returned the movie canister to his library.

Okay, big shots, one of your little toy soldiers is ready for the psych treatment, he thought sourly as he dropped the plastic tape onto the player and positioned the governor electrodes over his bed. I'd like to have the guy by the throat who invented this gadget, he muttered.

The tape only played when the electrodes picked up radiation from the brain telling that the subject was asleep; then the information became a part of his subconscious only. If he awoke, the player simply stopped until he went back to sleep. The results were frequently amazing. Blundering old space veterans had been converted overnight into smooth diplomats for negotiating with the sensitive Venusians. Timid souls had been fired up to brave the risks of delicate landings on tiny asteroids. And now it was his turn. What kind of pep talk did the psychology brain trust think he needed? Afraid he'd make a fool of himself in front of his crew?

He switched on the player savagely and set the volume level to suit a light sleeper; then he slit open the envelope and read the few imprinted lines.

"CAPTAIN GRIMES, SPACESHIP VULCAN, EN ROUTE PRIMUS. REVIEW OF ORDERS. ESTABLISH COMMUNICATIONS WITH PRIMUS CITIES: NEPHELE, ESTIVAL. DETERMINE CAUSE OF DEATHS OF PREVIOUS EXPLORERS. INVESTIGATE EXHAUSTIVELY, RUTHLESSLY. COMPLETE EXPLANATION ABSOLUTELY IMPERATIVE. YOUR SUCCESS MAY FORESTALL EXPEDITIONARY FORCE. UNITED NATIONS SERVICE HEAD-QUARTERS, PARIS."

He pushed the cold-blooded message through a discard slot and turned down the bed clothes. He hopped between the sheets and took a deep breath. Modern science was wonderful, he mused, but it hadn't yet found a substitute for a pair of clean sheets.

EXACTLY seven hours later Captain Grimes stepped into the pilot's room and nodded seriously at the men gathered

about the radio receiver. Aside from the operator there was Dr. Keith Johnson, the chief medical officer; Kai-Ling, the soft spoken pilot; and Engineer Bill Manson.

"We're still d.a.k, sir," the radio operator explained. "Just listening to land transmissions."

Grimes noted the red light in the center of the ceiling, indicating that the service recorder was operating.

"What's the time to go?" he asked Manson.

"Half hour, sir," the engineer said, glancing at the radar scope for verification.

"Cruise between Nephele and Estival at a hundred thousand," Grimes told the pilot.

The man was still wearing part of his traditional garments and part of his service uniform. Grimes made signs at him, at the same time pointing to the red light. The pilot grinned broadly and began to shed the Oriental half of his garb on the spot.

"All right, Johnny," Grimes addressed the radio operator. "I want to talk with the Mayor of Estival and I don't want to be by-passed by any army or air force official or anybody else."

The boy's fingers flew over his controls and in a matter of seconds he had the Estival Telephone Exchange. The first operator spoke no Terranian languages at all. The second one could only speak French and German. Then the chief operator took over and filled the room with the peculiar sing song quality of a Priman speaking English.

Grimes reminded himself that the Primans had done a miraculous job in learning any Terranian tongues at all, considering the terrific strain under which the teaching had taken place. They had been taught from the air by Dr. Allen Russell, after the first Terranian exploration had ended in a hundred per cent fatalities. Then the famous doctor himself had landed and had never made it back to his ship. That had set off the clamor at home for direct action against the dark skinned people of Primus. Mobs had actually stormed the UN building in Paris demanding blood.

Grimes aroused himself with a contemptuous shrug. Blood! The imbeciles! Most of them didn't know enough about Primans to know if they even had any blood; yet they were sure it was a case of wholesale

murder. The Primans didn't want anybody to get their precious uranium ore—that was the popular belief. And he had to risk the lives of the best space crew ever assembled to satisfy their impatience or the UN would be forced into a full scale attack.

"Here's the Mayor of Estival, sir," the radio operator said.

Grimes took a handset. "Captain Grimes . . . Spaceship Vulcan . . . Mister."

He waited for the acknowledgement. The mayor's voice was high pitched and unsteady, but his command of English was more than satisfactory.

"Mister of Estival," he said. "Greetings, Captain Grimes. Will you land?"

"We . . . will . . . not . . . land . . . at . . . once. Our . . . mission . . . may . . . be . . . the . . . last . . . peaceful . . . one . . . to . . . visit . . . Primus . . . if . . . the . . . mystery . . . of . . . the . . . Terranians' . . . deaths . . . is . . . not . . . solved."

"I understand you very well, Captain. You may speak more readily with me. What can I do to help you?"

Grimes relaxed and winked encouragingly at the doctor and Manson, then turned his attention back to the radio.

"We want a complete explanation of the cause of death of all Terranians who have landed on Primus. Have you performed autopsies on any of the bodies?"

"We are not equipped to operate as you are, Captain. We have almost no medical science on Primus. We are doing what we can but so far we have discovered nothing."

"My orders are to exploit every possibility. After us will come only a task force, Mayor of Estival."

THE mayor's voice carried a certain anxiety in spite of its sing-song quality. "Of course we will try to defend ourselves, but it would be hopeless. Our civilization is much further advanced than yours in many ways, but we have none of your weapons of war. We wouldn't even know how to take care of our wounded."

"My service knows that, Mister. But we can't reason with a mob, and that's what we have against us at home. I have expert medical personnel with me and a completely equipped laboratory. We intend to experiment extensively, both on your people and

on our own. I am authorized to demand your full cooperation."

"Cooperation is freely offered, Captain, but coercion is unknown on Primus. I cannot make personal bargains for the citizens of Estival."

"You won't need to. We'll make our own bargains, and at the end of an X gun if necessary. What have you done since the last expedition was here?"

"We have given the lie detector test to every Priman over the age of twenty—that is approximately five of your years—and no one has any knowledge of the Terranians' deaths. There is nothing toxic on Primus. We have not had a disease or an infection within the memory of any of our people. We don't know what else to do."

"All right, I believe you, but that won't slow us down a bit. Now listen to our plan. We are going to land one man at a time and have him report back to the ship at short intervals. Under no circumstances must any Priman come near this man or pay any attention to him. Is that clear?"

"That is clear, Captain; but I cannot accept your proposals in the form of ultimata. The people of Primus . . ."

Captain Grimes' voice hardened. "You'll do exactly as I tell you or there won't be an Estival much longer. Is that understood?"

The reply was slow in coming. "I understand, Captain. I will have the information broadcast immediately. I suggest you give me at least one of your hours."

"Make it two. Thanks for your cooperation, Mister. Good-bye."

Grimes tossed the handset to the radio operator. "Send a retorting of that conversation to the Mayor of Nephele," he said.

The boy nodded and began calling the Nephele exchange. Grimes turned to Dr. Johnson.

"I want a man for a dangerous job that will require mental alertness at all times. Who would you recommend?"

Manson spoke up before the doctor could make up his mind. "Myself, sir," he said.

Grimes dismissed the engineer without even looking at him. "Need you here, Manson. How about Fuqua?" he asked the doctor.

"I would suggest Lerner, your assistant astro-navigator. He's the healthiest specimen

aboard and genuinely courageous, I'm quite certain."

"Call Lerner on the inter-com, Johnny," Grimes told the radio operator. Then to Bill Manson he said, "Get a Mars kit ready for him, and then have one TV camera equipped with a long boy. I want to be able to watch every step Lerner takes, just as if I were alongside him."

He then strode rapidly to the pilot's desk and called Kai-Ling to a window.

Somewhere in the back of his brain something was worrying him. All along he had pictured himself leading a half dozen of his crew in a sort of battle formation from one sector of the city to the next, alert to catch a Priman sniper or uncover a booby-trap. Now here he was making plans to send one man out alone—probably to certain death. What did he expect to gain from that? Was he softening under pressure? Or was he really applying reason, as he tried to convince himself?

"I want you to hover ten feet above that end of the airstrip," he told the pilot, pointing. "We'll drop Lerner from that height. But don't go down until I tell you."

When he returned to the doctor's side, the two of them were temporarily alone. Grimes sat down heavily and leaned toward the doctor.

"This is a ticklish situation, Doc. I've got a wonderful bunch of kids on this ship, but not many mature, level heads. I'm not sure they'll see eye to eye with my tactics."

Dr. Johnson studied him for a moment. "That's always important with you, isn't it?"

Grimes half evaded the older man's eyes. "It always has been in the past, but something's different this time. I think that damn tape must have done something to me. The only thing I seem to think about now is results. To be frank, Doc, I'm a lot more worried about how we're going to get to the bottom of this business than I am about how many men we'll lose in the process. And that doesn't sound like the Grimes I used to be at all."

"You've never had a job like this one. You don't know yet how you'll react to the developments."

Grimes snorted. "Don't worry, I'll react effectively all right. The psychology boys took care of that."

"Navigator Lerner, sir."

Grimes returned the salute and looked the boy over quickly. Not more than twenty-three, tall, not the least muscular; and not the least worried, if the eyes told anything.

"This is big stuff, Lerner," Grimes said seriously. "That's why I didn't ask for a volunteer. I have to have the best man, whether he's eager or not. You'll take a radio and a direct-view explosive pistol. You'll start toward the city from where we drop you and do nothing but observe until you receive an order from me. If anything happens to your radio reception you'll return to the ship immediately. Any questions so far?"

"No, sir."

Grimes studied the confident features almost enviously. "Keep your eyes and ears open and report anything that interests you immediately. We'll follow you on TV and try to anticipate your needs." He had to bite his lip to continue the instructions. "Be sure to let us know instantly if you feel any of the usual symptoms."

Lerner's eyes remained steady as he nodded.

A few minutes later he dropped lightly to the surface of the planet and waited for his first instructions.

"Stay on the hard surface of the airstrip," Grimes ordered. "Don't kick up any dust as you walk. Don't touch anything with your exposed skin."

THE navigator started toward the buildings at the far end of the airstrip. He wore a light linen suit that looked more like an eighteenth century houri's costume than anything an inter-planetary explorer might wear. It was belted around the waist and again at the ankles, and thin enough to reveal the athletic supporter which was his only undergarment. He carried the receiver-transmitter over one shoulder and held the X pistol, with its brightly focussed target scope, ready in his hand. He had slid some "Uneasy" pills from a Mars kit under the strap of his wristwatch. They were a great help in combating nausea during the first few hours on the light planet. The UN labs were working on a special kit for use on Primus, but in the meantime the Mars kit seemed to be a satisfactory substitute. The

reduced gravitational pull of the smaller planets worked strange tricks on a man's insides and most explorers resorted freely to the pills, which they had nicknamed "Uneasy."

"There's a vegetable growth of some kind in the cracks along the airstrip here," Lerner's voice came steadily over the loud speaker.

"Don't touch it with your bare skin," Grimes said quickly. "They probably haven't used the airstrip since the last expedition from Terra. Is there any odor rising from it?"

He watched the young navigator dip into a semi-crouch. "Nothing that I can detect, sir."

"All right, got on. Go inside the UN building and see if it's empty. If there's anybody there, come out immediately. Keep talking all the time you're inside. I want a word picture of everything you see."

As Lerner approached the buildings about a half mile away, Grimes switched from a direct view to the television screen that maintained a life-size close-up. He felt a momentary urge to organize a small force and lead it up to the navigator's position. What kept him back? That was the way he had planned it before the tape had gone to work on him. What were Manson and the others thinking now?

"The photo-electric cell is still operating the door," Lerner said. "I don't see anybody around."

The television camera still showed the front of the building. There was no window through which it could scan the inside.

"Look around carefully and don't move until you're sure of yourself," Grimes ordered. "According to the reports, you should be in a lobby surrounded by glass-walled offices. Is that the picture?"

"That is correct, sir. I don't see any signs of anybody. Wait . . ." The voice stopped for a minute. Captain Grimes leaned forward tensely. Then Lerner began to speak again, hesitantly.

"I see . . . I see a costume hanging . . . hanging in one of the offices. There might be somebody there . . . probably just wearing shorts or something. I don't feel so good . . ."

"Get out of there quick," Grimes shouted.

"Yes, sir," came the reply, weakly. "There is someone here. He sees me but I don't think he . . . I don't know if he's coming down. Yes, I guess he is. He's only wearing shorts. He's . . . what did you say, Captain?"

"I said get out of there. Get out of there at once, Lerner."

"I can't make you out, sir. My head hurts. I'm coming out. I feel sick at my stomach. I . . ."

The voice trailed off and after a moment Lerner stumbled into the field of the TV camera and stood unsteadily before the big UN building. Then his scream of pain came vibrating from the speaker.

"Captain Grimes! Larsen! Somebody, stop it. For God's sake, shoot!"

He pointed his pistol excitedly in all directions, firing wildly with the high-explosive bullets. Grimes turned from the TV screen to the window, grabbing a pair of binoculars. All he could see was the staggering figure of the navigator, stabbing the space around him with his pistol and screaming over the radio.

"Stop it, Lerner. Stop that firing and screaming. There's nothing bothering you. Get back here immediately. On the double."

Even as he shouted the futile orders, Grimes saw the boy slump to the ground writhing and clutching at his insides. In five seconds it was all over. The brutal telescopic lens of the TV camera showed the blood spilling from his open mouth—there was no other motion.

Then the camera picked up the figure of the Priman as he popped into view from inside the building. There was a moment of shocked silence inside the spaceship.

Then three things happened at once.

Somebody snarled, "Get that rat!" There was a flash from a high-powered rifle and the resultant explosion of the bullet against the front of the UN building, too high to do any damage. There was the leap of the startled Priman backward through the door.

Grimes jumped to the communication panel and grabbed a handset. "Stop that firing. Fall in for inspection of firearms immediately. Lieutenant Ramsey, conduct the inspection. Place the man who fired that round in confinement. Lieutenant Fuqua,

position your gunners and give orders to fire only at my command."

He threw the handset back in its place and then grabbed it again immediately. "Start scanning the area with the TV camera. Get off that body. There's nothing new there."

"The mayor's on again," the radio operator broke in.

Grimes switched handsets and growled his greeting.

"Captain Grimes," the undulating voice said excitedly. "I have just received a call from the airfield. It seems that one of our citizens was fired upon. We cannot allow that kind of . . ."

"You'll allow anything that you can't help. One of my men is dead. I can't allow that either, but what can I do about it?" He caught the anxious expression on Dr. Johnson's face and calmed down somewhat. "I'm sorry, Mister, about the firing. The man is being punished. What did your citizen report? Did he do anything?"

"He did nothing. The Terranian entered the building without first reporting to the sanitation chambers. We will resist this sort of thing to our utmost, Captain."

"All right, you've said that before. I've got nothing against you, Mister—at least, nothing that I can prove, but if I don't get to the bottom of this trouble you'll soon find yourself putting up the most futile resistance in solar history. Now listen to me. Get everybody out of the UN building. What we're looking for must be right there. That may not be the only place, but it'll do for a starter."

"I will have the building vacated, Captain. Will you please observe the sanitation procedure? We must not have any germ diseases transmitted on Primus."

"If we pollute you we'll cure you. Quit worrying about it. Do as I tell you."

THERE was no reply. The transmission went dead. Grimes watched the TV screen which again showed the UN building. After a while three Primans scurried through the door and ran toward the city, not even glancing at the crumpled figure of the navigator.

Grimes turned to Dr. Johnson, about to suggest that he name another man for the

outside job when he noticed Bill Manson calmly adjusting the receiver-transmitter over his shoulder. He had already selected several items from the Mars kit spread out on the floor, and had slipped them into a plastic case strapped above one knee.

"All right, Manson; you win," Grimes said gratefully. "But take it easy. There's no hurry. Examine everything inside that lobby before you take two steps away from the door. Better yet, stay outside for a while. He might have picked up some poison before he went in."

"I'll do my best, Captain. Don't worry, I'll be back. Remember, I'm the boy who's getting married next June."

The captain said nothing. He felt he was hitting a new low now—sending Manson out. Still it was the only sensible thing to do.

What good would it do for him to be out there convulsing on the ground? Who could take over and run the ship any better if he did sacrifice himself?

He snapped out of it and concentrated on watching the engineer's figure retreating down the long Priman airstrip.

Except for the insignificant fungus growing out of the cracks, there was nothing of interest between the spaceship and the buildings and Manson hardly paused until he was opposite Lerner's body.

"Don't touch him," Grimes ordered. "We'll look at him later if possible. And stand around for a while before you go any further. Is there anything peculiar at all? Any small animal life? Any strange smells?"

"Just this stinking atmosphere. I don't see a thing, sir. There's no doubt that Lerner's dead."

Grimes watched the engineer stroll around aimlessly in front of the UN building for a full twenty minutes and then finally gave him permission to enter.

"I'm propping the door open," Manson said. "There's nothing in the lobby. Looks like there were tables and chairs here at one time, but they've been taken out."

The voice prattled on and Grimes tried to relax while listening, but he found himself tensing with the beginning of each sentence.

"I feel a little woozy," Manson said all of a sudden. "It's just the light gravity, I

know. I've been on Mars—it's the same sensation."

"Nevertheless, get out of that building immediately," Grimes shouted.

The engineer's figure appeared at once on the TV screen and Grimes breathed a sigh of relief. Just the same he reassured himself with a pair of binoculars that Manson was all right, as though he didn't trust the electronic image.

"How do you feel?" he asked anxiously.

"So so good. I never really got used to walking on Mars, and I was there a dozen times or more. I never stopped taking the Uneasy pills, though I got so I used to bite 'em in half and take . . . just . . . a . . . part . . ."

"What's the matter with you?" Grimes yelled, though he could see readily enough what was the matter. The boy was doubled over in pain. His lips moved frantically in an effort to talk, but no sound came out. He tried to straighten once but a new attack seized him and he half fell to the ground. His screams of pain filled the spaceship until Grimes could stand it no longer.

"Get down there quick," he commanded the pilot. "And shut off that speaker," he hollered at the radio operator.

Now what was he doing? Risking the entire ship and crew. And for what? To try to save one man? He knew better. That would have been his reason in the old days—now he wasn't thinking of the man. He was thinking of results. He had to know what was happening. One thing kept hammering in his brain. His mission. He had a mission, and it was more important than one man or a whole crew of men.

The big ship moved silently and rapidly to the other end of the runway. Grimes had the exit port open by the time they stopped beside the twisting body of the engineer.

He grabbed the medium sized figure under the armpits and pulled his head and shoulders up inside the ship. Dr. Johnson gave a hand and they soon had Manson laid out on the floor of the pilot's room. A hypodermic appeared almost magically in the doctor's hand.

"There's nothing left to do," he said to the excited captain.

"Get away from him," Grimes shouted fiendishly, jumping forward and pushing

the doctor back. "He's got to talk. He's got to."

"My God, Captain, he's dying with pain," a third voice broke in.

Grimes looked up to see the angry face of Lieutenant Ramsey glaring at him. Behind Ramsey, several other crew members stared unbelievably from their commander's face to the tortured body on the floor.

GRIMES didn't know exactly what he was doing, but he did it effectively just the same. He shot a right cross that caught Ramsey on the jaw and knocked him senseless. Then he knelt beside his chief engineer.

"Who did it, boy? What did it? You've got to tell me. Do you understand—you've got to talk."

Manson tried. When he opened his mouth Grimes could see the blood gathering and it nearly made him sick. He thought his own insides would burst with each convulsion of the younger man's body.

"It was . . . I think it was . . ."

The voice trailed off in a new spasm that ended in a violent kicking of his arms and legs as if he were fighting off an attacking animal. Then he vomited hideously and slowly relaxed.

Grimes looked at the doctor and beyond him could see the men still glowering at him accusingly.

"It's too late now," Dr. Johnson shook his head.

"I guess we don't know any more than we did," Grimes said weakly. "Make it easy for him if you can."

He spun around and concentrated on the radar map with no real interest. A crash of something fragile caused him to turn again toward the figure on the floor. Bill Manson had knocked the needle from the doctor's hand and was struggling to speak.

Grimes leaped to his side instantly and cradled the boy's head in his hands. "Speak up, Bill."

"It was . . . the pill. I'm sure it was the pill," Manson said. He shook his head and the glaze partly left his eyes. "I only took half a pill, like I used to on Mars; I couldn't help it. . . . I was getting sick. I felt it almost at once, then it really hit me after about two minutes."

"What pill? The Uneasy pill?" Grimes couldn't believe in so simple an explanation. "They've been checked at home for years."

"Must be a slip somewhere. They weren't designed for Primus. I'll bet my life it was the pill."

"Never mind betting your life any more now. You get some rest."

He snapped to his feet. "Give him something," he told the doctor. "And take care of him. We'll analyze those pills ourselves. There's going to be hell to pay if he's right, and just this minute I'm betting that he is."

"Betting your life, Captain?"

Grimes spun to find Lieutenant Ramsey rubbing his jaw and eyeing him bitterly.

"Yes, Lieutenant, betting my life." He ran to a wall cabinet and jerked out a Mars kit and suit. He tore open the kit and threw out the Uneasy pills; then he hurriedly donned the suit. Maybe that was the answer after all, he mused grimly. Something in the atmosphere reacted with the pill. They had never been declared official for Primus. No time to worry about that now however.

He dropped to the surface of the planet and ran to the UN building. He flung himself inside and ran wildly up and down the stair, shouting like a vacation-crazed school-boy. From the first building he went on to the others, and then into the city, stopping to be sick when he felt the urge and actually enjoying the pain.

Hours later an exhausted Captain Grimes returned to his spaceship to be greeted by an apologetic and happier crew.

"The boy's going to be all right," Dr. Johnson told him. "He thinks he owes his life to the fact that he only took half a pill, but I don't know. I'd say it was just plain old guts."

"How about the pills?"

"No doubt about them, but I haven't pinned it down yet. We put a pump on Manson and found some sodium chlorate in his stomach. That's NaClO_3 , you know, and you could get it from ordinary table salt, NaCl , and ozone, O_3 , if you could combine them. The Uneasy pill has the NaCl all right, and there's plenty of ozone in the atmosphere here—you've smelled it, of course. Smells like chlorine.

Grimes nodded impatiently. "But you

couldn't get enough sodium chlorate to kill a man from one medium size pill, could you?"

"No, you couldn't. It is poisonous, however. It's used as an insecticide and as a weed-killer. But it's highly unstable and I don't know how it could have been formed from such a stable substance as sodium chloride. But we've never really had a chance to analyze this atmosphere. I'll work on it on the way back. Whatever the catalyst is, it must have allowed some other ozonides to form, and many of them are highly explosive. A man could literally have been blown to pieces from the inside. It must have been something that could produce hallucinations too, judging from Lerner's actions."

Grimes laughed bitterly, but with relief. "Man, do we owe the Primans an apology! I better draft something quick; then we'll shove off."

Lieutenant Ramsey was the only one who managed to speak.

"I insist on making out a voluntary on my actions, sir. I don't know what came over me."

The captain pushed him aside. "There'll be no voluntaries passed across my desk. I'm capable of reporting on conditions in my ship."

He went on to his private quarters.

Well, it was over, he thought wearily. The psychology boys had been right again. He had felt like a mechanical man all the time. He never would have believed he could send men out like that—and the ship! He could have lost everything.

He glanced at the tape player still in position at his bedside. Suddenly, on impulse, he dived at it and threw it open at the top. He shorted out the governor circuits and then re-wound the tape to the playing position. He had heard of commanders doing it before, and vaguely he was aware that there was an order forbidding it, but he replayed the tape anyway—this time to his conscious mind.

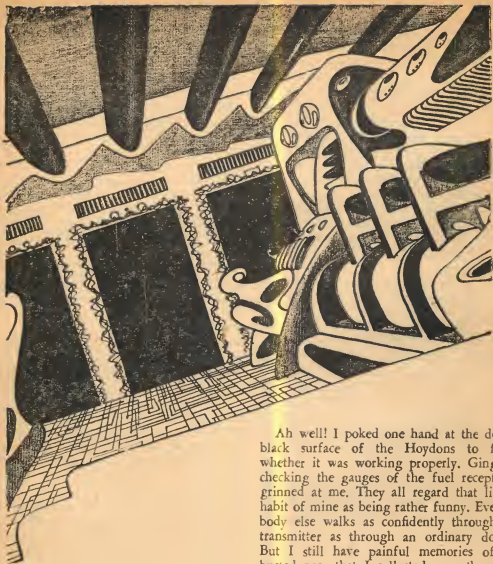
There was some soft, dreamy music for a couple of minutes, then a feminine voice whispered, "Sleep well, Captain Grimes. Sleep well." That was all, except for some more music.

HOYDONS AWEIGH!

By J. W. GROVES

It's a long time between furloughs for restless space voyagers. Brand's was long enough for the entire universe to turn topsy-turvy under the infamous rule of the strange Touch-Not-the-Apple League.





IT'S FUNNY in a way, I mused. For the whole of your three months' spell of duty you look forward to your furlough. Make plans about where you will go, what you will do, try to figure out how much things will have changed. Then, when the time comes to go, you don't altogether want to. There is something about deep space that tugs at a man—and a hundred light years on the way to Betelgeuse is very deep space indeed. Then, too, the other men on the same spell of duty are the only human beings a Voyager ever really gets to know. The only true companionship he ever has.

Ah well! I poked one hand at the dead black surface of the Hoydons to feel whether it was working properly. Ginger, checking the gauges of the fuel receptor, grinned at me. They all regard that little habit of mine as being rather funny. Everybody else walks as confidently through a transmitter as through an ordinary door. But I still have painful memories of a busted nose that I collected once through doing that. And, of course, I didn't even get the consolation of bawling out the operator who was responsible.

His grandson did explain it to me, though. It seems that if a Hoydons receptor is dead on the beam, but very slightly off tune, it will neither receive the transmitted waves nor allow them to pass. Instead it establishes a state of interference with them, they become too distorted to be able to carry a matter pattern—and the person waiting to be transmitted just stops where he is.

However, everything seemed to be all right this time, so, "see you in a century

or two," I said, and stepped through.

Terra gravity made my knees sag a little. It always does when you take your first step out of the near weightlessness of the ship. Then I had a good look at the guy who was waiting to meet me.

We always do that. It's interesting to see how much male fashions have changed while you've been gone. I was glad to note that pants had come in again. Never did like those kilt-like things they were wearing during my last furlough. Whatever Dame Fashion says, men in skirts will always look wrong to anyone born when I was. Jackets seemed to be out, though. At any rate this man was wearing some sort of skin tight vest of a material that was new to me. And he was. . . .

It was then that my skin began to crawl. Yeah, I had expected things to be different. But not this different.

When we Voyagers arrive on Terra we expect to be greeted by enthusiastic crowds, flooded by requests for autographs, deluged with offers to take us around and show us the new way of life in this century. That is why we debouch out of the Hoydons into a small, sealed room in the Science Council's headquarters. So that we won't be torn to pieces by hero worshippers.

Yet here was this little rat holding a vita-rupter at the ready! And he wasn't using it to keep off any crowds, either. For close quarter killing the vita-rupter, with its long, tight beam of hard radiations, is the ultimate weapon.

I WAS so staggered that I let him speak first. "Brand," he grated, "you are under arrest."

I exploded. "Under arrest! Are you crazy? What in the name of thunder would I be under arrest for?"

"For being a Voyager."

"Oh! And since when has that been a criminal offense?"

"Since ten years ago. The election before last. When the T.N.A.L. won a majority in all Sol planets."

The flaming rage inside me went dead then. And left in its place was something cold and bitter, mixed with the first faint flutterings of fear.

I had heard of the T.N.A.L., which was

more than most people had the last time I was on the home planet. The "Touch-Not-The-Apple" League, their full title was. The sort of silly, psuedo-romantic name you would expect a bunch of nuts like them to adopt. It seems they took it from an old Jewish legend about the first man and woman on Terra, who called down a curse upon themselves and their descendants by eating of the apple of knowledge after they had been forbidden to do so.

And the T.N.A.L. taught that the curse still existed, that man should give up the search for knowledge, and revert to a simple, non-scientific way of life in order to save himself.

The first seeds of the movement were sown right back as far as the 20th Century. An economic recession caused by the misapplication of labor saving devices, and a war historically notable because during it atomic power was first discovered and used as a weapon, started a number of religious leaders and other influential people crying that science had gone too far.

The League itself, though, was born during the series of devastating atomic wars that marred the 21st Century, and it had a pretty large membership until the succeeding three hundred years of peace whittled it away. It was revived again when the Red Plague, brought home from Pluto by the first interplanetary ship to reach that world, raged through Terra and reduced her inhabitants by half in less than six months. And again when an abortive attempt to dredge certain rare metals from the outer sphere of the Sun caused a violent eruption of flaming gas that obliterated a settlement of half a million people on Mercury.

Still, even at its most powerful it had never come within a million light years of winning an election.

"I don't believe it," I snapped.

"No?" he snarled. "Then just try resisting arrest. I'd be within my legal rights to use the 'rupter on you."

Legal rights or not, I could see that he was quite willing to use it.

"All right," I said. "And so I'm under arrest. What happens next?"

"Solitary confinement until your trial, of course."

"Oh? And what about my constitutional right to appeal for bail, and see my legal representative?"

"Things have changed since you were here last, Voyager. All constitutional rights are automatically suspended for anyone charged with scientific research."

I COULD believe it. It was just the sort of thing a bunch like the T.N.A.L. would do, monkey around with the Solar System's constitution, held sacred by all governments for the last two thousand years.

To be perfectly honest it wasn't only my intellectual conviction that their ideas were wrong and dangerous that made me hate them so. I had another, more personal reason. An old story as far as stay-at-homes on Terra are concerned, but still new to me.

"All right, don't stand there all day digesting it," snapped my captor irritably. "Get moving. And put your hands above your head as you go."

There didn't seem much I could do but obey, so with my hands up I preceded him through the door. Then I got my second shock.

The door didn't open on to a balcony with a thronged and busy street below, as it had before. Instead it led us into a long, white-tiled corridor, lined on both sides with flush-set, windowless doors.

"So convenient," I said bitterly. "Just shift the Hoydons itself inside the penitentiary, and your prisoners will come straight to the spot. Saves all the bother of transporting them. And makes it less likely that the public will catch on to what's happening."

He didn't bother to answer. Just motioned me towards one of the cells that had its door ajar, and locked up behind me as I entered.

A long time passed. At least, it seemed a long time. There was no means of knowing, really, inside that cell, which was bare, windowless, and furnished with only a low, hard pallet which apparently had to serve both as chair and bed.

Much as I tried to stop myself, I began to worry. How were the people of Terra getting on under T.N.A.L. rule? Carried to its logical conclusion their creed could mean actual starvation on the planet. Sure-

ly, though, even they wouldn't be fools enough to try to replace hydroponic farming and the culture production of meat by the old primitive methods of agriculture?

It was a safe bet, though, that they would stop all interstellar, and probably all interplanetary travel. The race, one mighty unit now, would break up into a number of independent, sovereign groups. It might even mean the reintroduction of war if they stayed in power long enough.

II

BEING a Voyager on the Betelgeuse expedition is an interesting life, but it has several major disadvantages. When Hoydon invented his matter transmission apparatus he did a remarkably good job. The radiations into which the transmitted article is reduced are sent out in an almost perfectly tight beam. They travel through any solid mass, however huge, without loss, and mingle with any other radiations normally found in nature without interference. Even at a distance of hundreds of light years they can be reassembled into the original article with hardly more than the loss of an atom or two.

However, there are two things which even Hoydon could not overcome.

First, no transmitter is any good without a receptor. Which means that before a Hoydons can be set up in any part of space, a rocket ship must get there first. An enormously simplified rocket ship, of course, compared with those that were in use before the transmitter was invented. One that doesn't have to carry any fuel or air or food. But still, essentially, a rocket ship.

Second, no radiation can travel faster than the speed of light. A member of the crew on that rocket ship can step back to Terra instantly whenever he pleases—instantly as far as he is concerned. On Terra, though, time will pass while he travels. The time that the radiations take to get back from the ship at the speed of light.

And my ship was two thirds of the way to Betelgeuse. Just over a hundred light years away from Sol.

Oh, it was interesting in its way, as I said before. A new world to come back to every time you went on furlough. A

ringside seat while history happened. But. . . It didn't do to make any real friends. You would say good-bye to them, go to work for three months, and return to find their very tombstones moldering. On top of that, it was almost impossible to keep check on what was happening in such matters as social customs, fashions, and politics. Difficult even to keep pace with the changing language at times.

I was feeling pretty sorry for myself by the time I heard the lock of the door being opened.

"Hullo, Voyager Brand," said a voice softly.

I looked up then, all right, mouth agape. A pretty girl stood in the doorway.

My eyes flickered over her incredulously. She was young and supple, and dressed on a garment that was skin tight except where it flared into an abbreviated skirt. Her black hair hung in curls to her shoulders. And her gray eyes must have been remarkably fine to see when they were not clouded by worry as they were now.

I made some sort of noise in my throat. "Don't ask questions now," she snapped. "Hurry. They may be back in a minute."

I could see the point of hurrying, but as for not asking questions, it couldn't be done.

"How the heck did you get in here, anyway?" I asked as I joined her at the door. "When I was here last a planetary penitentiary was the toughest place to break in to or out of that . . ."

"It still is. This isn't a penitentiary. We aren't even on Terra. That was a psychological trick to make you feel that it was hopeless to try to break out."

I began to feel better. "So that little rat was lying when he said the T.N.A.L. was in power?"

"Yes."

She was leading the way down the door-lined corridor by now. She seemed to know where she was going, so I followed her without arguing, though I spared a moment to examine one of the doors. They were fakes, solid parts of the wall cleverly shaded and indented. Well, that checked; but things still didn't seem to make much sense.

"If we aren't on Terra," I said, "Where are we?"

"On one of the T.N.A.L.'s private ships. Just outside the Moon's orbit. The gravity is centrifugally induced. They've got the ship in direct line with the Betelgeuse beam, so that their Hoydons picks up the transmission before it gets to the planet."

"Illegal of course, but that's hardly likely to worry them," I commented. "What's the point of it all, though? And what's happened to the other furlough-bound Voyagers they picked up? Or am I the first?"

SHE answered my questions in reverse order. "You're not. There have been two others. And they've done with them what they intended to do with you. Pumped them full of Tynam germs, hung on to them until the disease started to develop, then sent them on to Terra."

"Tynam germs?" I puzzled over the name for a moment. "Tynam is a planet round Sirius, isn't it? But I didn't know . . ."

"The germs are native to one of its jungles. Explorers brought them back to our planet about fifty years ago. You've heard of the Red Plague? Well, this was quicker and fiercer. It didn't do quite so much damage, though. Medical science is more advanced than it was then, so the authorities were able to get the epidemic under control more rapidly. Still, it caused enough of a panic for the T.N.A.L. to be able to stage a revival. They won nearly a third of the seats in the Solar Congress at the last election."

"I begin to get it. They think another outbreak will just about clinch matters for them. But how do they expect to kid people that the Betelgeuse expedition has picked up the seeds of any plague? Why, we're still fifty or sixty light years away from the star. We can't even see if it has any planets yet, let alone get germs off of them."

"But the majority of people don't know enough about science to realize it. Oh, I know the Science Council could convince them in a week or two. If they had a week or two. They haven't. The elections are in three days time."

I whistled softly. "And if the T.N.A.L. win there won't be any Science Council, of course. Or else a packed one that will

give out only the facts that suit the new government."

"Exactly. And there won't be any Hoydons to pick up returning Voyagers, either."

I thought of my eight hundred odd fellow space rovers—just over four hundred in the inward and outward beams, three on duty, three supposedly on furlough—all of them except myself and the two who were probably dead going ahead with their great adventure blindly confident of the goodwill of Terra and the continuance of the cooperation they needed. Loathing of the League rose in my throat.

"Why didn't you tell the Solar Security Police?" I demanded. "If they are still half the force that they were when I knew them they would run every last one of the swines into jail so fast . . ."

"Without proof?" she said. "Remember, as far as the public knows, the T.N.A.L. is a respectable, old-established political party. In fact to some people it's almost a religion. Nobody but half a dozen of its highest leaders and myself know of this little plot. Of course if I get you back to Terra alive it will be different."

She paused for a moment, then added with a sudden flash of temper, "and anyway, you don't realize just how stupidly obstinate some members of our marvellous police force can be."

That last bit surprised me. Up till then she had been talking more or less impersonally. But her final comment hadn't sounded that way at all.

She had been walking in front of me while we talked, turning her head every now and then to answer. There was something about her profile that fascinated me. Her straight, not-too-large nose, her full, softly curving lips, the cluster of grace curls at the nape of her neck where the long tresses parted.

"How did you get to know about the scheme?" I demanded suddenly, though I had already begun to suspect the answer to that one.

"I . . . I'd rather not say."

She seemed embarrassed, so I didn't press the matter. By this time we had reached the end of the fake jail corridor. We turned right at the end. There was

one other genuine door, I saw, besides the one that led to my cell. She put her hand on the latch of it, and motioned me to silence.

"There are only two of them on the ship," she whispered. "But one of them has a 'rupter."

"Don't I know," I muttered.

"We must try to get to their Hoydons bank without being seen," she went on. "This door leads to the room that contains it. It's round to the right. I'm going to peep through to make sure there's nobody about. When I say the word, run straight for the bank and jump into the biggest transmitter, the one in the middle. That's beamed to the genuine Betelgeuse reception chamber on Terra."

She opened the door softly and poked her nose through.

"Now!"

SHE started to run. I dived after her. The floor of the other room seemed to slope sharply upwards, looked at from the one we were leaving, but as we landed on it it became level, and it was the fake prison corridor that was canted steeply. Centrifugally induced gravity has that effect.

The bank was twenty feet away. There were half a dozen small receptors at the top for fuel, air and so on. Beneath them was a large transmitter, and one on each side of it twin transmitters and receptors, presumably beamed to the T.N.A.L. headquarters.

We had covered about half the distance towards them when suddenly I pulled up, grabbing the girl. Somebody was coming through! Only. . . . He wasn't coming the conventional way, via the passenger receptors, but through one of the small ones at the top.

It might have been funny if we had been in any mood for laughing. The first thing that came into sight was a pair of big boots, followed by long, blueclad legs. Then a bulky, rather scared-looking young man wielding a heavy spanner dropped neatly to his feet.

"Alrac!" the girl screamed. "Why you . . ."

A door was flung open behind us. I swung round. It was the man who had

walked me to my cell. And he was lifting his 'rupter.

I closed my eyes. There is one thing to be said for death by the 'rupter. It is painless.

After a couple of seconds I found I was still alive, so I opened up again. In a rather dramatic attitude the girl was standing in front of the new arrival and me, her arms outstretched.

"You . . . You'll have to kill me first," she quavered.

I felt a little humiliated, sheltering behind a woman's skirts—such brief ones, too!

But the gentleman with the 'rupter would have a little less than no compunction at all about raying me down. Or, I suspected, the boy behind me. But for some reason he hesitated to turn his weapon on the girl. And it wasn't because he had any fancy notions about chivalry, either.

Some vague suspicions that had been floating around in my mind began to crystallize into near certainties.

The man with the 'rupter called over his shoulder. "Craven. Come here a moment."

Through the same door that the other had used stepped a beefy, florid-faced man. He gaped at the scene.

III

"ZENA!" he snarled. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think?" defied the girl.

"You've been listening to that damned aunt of yours. And spying on us. . . . You realize that I ought to have you killed? If that Voyager had escaped it would have meant the end of all our plans. Maybe the end of the League."

"That's just what I wanted," she flared. "And the Voyager would have escaped, too, if some blundering fool hadn't butted in."

I felt sorry for that lad with the spanner. My back was turned to him, but I could almost feel the blush that was burning his face. The beefy man ignored the girl's reply, turned to his companion.

"Better lock them all in the cell for a while. This needs thinking over. Now that girl's ratted things are a little difficult."

"I haven't ratted," she snapped. "Ever since I've been old enough to understand, I've disagreed with your League. And now that I've found out just what sort of tricks you use to get into power, I . . ."

She trailed off. The beefy man was gone. Only the underling with the 'rupter remained. Smirking rather nastily he gestured for us to walk back into the corridor with the cell.

"Jump for the transmitter," whispered the girl urgently. "I'll cover you."

"Too risky," declared the lad behind me, gloomily. "I think he'd ray even you rather than let us escape."

I was inclined to think he was right, and when he started to walk forward I joined him.

"I don't know who you are or why you butted in," I said softly. "But you would have been a lot more useful if you'd brought a 'rupter instead of that spanner. What was the idea?"

"This is unofficial," he replied. "I'm not on duty. All our 'rupters are taken away from us at the end of a tour of duty. And anyway I never thought . . ."

"You never do think. That's your whole trouble," snapped Zena.

On the whole I rather agreed with her. But I certainly couldn't blame him for the way he felt about the girl. I knew myself how easy it was to fall hard for a girl like Zena, temper and all.

By this time we were level with the door that led back into the corridor with the cell. Zena went through. Bitterly resentful, I hesitated for a moment. Our captor made a sharp gesture with his weapon. And that was his big mistake.

I'll say one thing for the rankers in the Security Police. They may not be giants of intellect, but they do have lightning-fast reflexes and an instinct for handling trouble. That boy was still swinging his ludicrous spanner when the nose of the 'rupter pointed away from us. And in the brief flash of time before it could be pointed back again he acted.

If he'd been foolish enough to try for the man we should all have been dead meat inside a second. He didn't. He jabbed his piece of metal at the 'rupter itself, meeting it as it swung back towards us. It jarred

out of its owner's hand and slid across the floor.

Tiny shards of crystal scattered from it as it went, and out of its badly dented nose a long, bright-metal spring thrust itself, quivering like an antenna.

There was no need to worry about that weapon any more. I joined with the lad in jumping on the rat who had been wielding it. He had time to scream "Craven!" just once before he went down to hit his head on the floor with a sodden thump.

CRAVEN came racing out, dived past us, and headed for the bank of Hoydons. I started after him. The boy snatched up his spanner, swung it in a wide arc, and let it fly. He made a pretty good throw, but the man was too close to his goal, and managed to dive into the transmitter just ahead of the missile.

Even then with a bit of luck it might have followed him through; but a piece of protruding framework caught it and sent it spinning up and over. It fell onto the casing that covered the tubes and circuit winding of the Hoydons, smashed a jagged hole, and plunged through. Blue lightning crackled briefly. A curl of gray smoke spiralled upwards. The Hoydons bank went cold.

And so did I.

I don't think either of the other two realized just what had happened to us. The boy tried to jump through the transmitter frame, snarled with chagrin when he got nothing out of it but a bumped nose.

"He's got away!" he exclaimed.

"If he has, it's your fault," cried the girl furiously. "If you weren't such a stupid, interfering . . ."

The boy managed to look pathetic and angry at the same time. "But it was you who kept trying to persuade me to interfere," he protested. "When you found out what was going on . . ."

"And got told I was a fool for my pains . . ."

"I didn't say that. I said the higher-ups in Security would think you a fool if you went to them with such a story. Do try to be reasonable, Zena. After all, I did follow you through when I realized where you had gone."

"You did. Through the air transmitter

instead of the passenger one. Of all the silly tricks . . ."

"I thought they would be less likely to be watching the air receptor," he said defensively, then added a little lamely, "I forgot they would probably both be in the same bank."

"You would. If you had had the sense not to interfere, the Voyager and I would have been safely on Terra by now."

"Peace, children," I said loudly and emphatically.

They stopped arguing for a moment, so I went on hurriedly. "Your father has escaped, Zena, and that's all there is to it."

SHE opened her eyes wide. "He isn't my father," she protested. "My father died when I was a baby. He's my uncle. But how did you know Craven and I were related?"

"Guessed it when he wouldn't have you rayed. Anyhow, it's the only thing that would account for your being close enough to them to find out what was going on out here, when they must have known you were opposed to their ideas. The T.N.A.L.—at any rate the higher councils of it—has been more or less a family concern among your relatives for years, hasn't it? Tell me about that aunt he mentioned. The one who led you away from the fold. Was her name Zena, too?"

"No," she replied softly. "But my mother's was. And it was she who first began to make me see how wrong the T.N.A.L. are."

"Your mother."

"Yes. She left me a stereo-pic of you, Voyager. One of those old-fashioned ones embedded in transparent plastic. Her mother left it to her. It's been in the family for generations, and it's always been a sort of talisman among the rebel section. When I found out what my uncle was up to I just tried to get Alrac here to take the thing up officially, but after I realized that you were the next man due out of the beam—well, I had to do something myself."

"Oh." I felt a little awkward. "Well . . . thanks."

Alrac began to resent the turn that the conversation had taken. "Look," he interrupted. "This is all very interesting; but we've got more important things to think

of. The main point is, what do we do next?"

"As far as I can see there is nothing that we can do. Except perhaps step through a porthole and get it over quickly." Brutal, I know, but the situation was brutal, and it was better that they should know it.

Alrac went goggled-eyed, and stayed that way. Zena gaped a bit too, but she grasped it first. "Oh . . . I see what you mean. We're. . . We're stranded, aren't we? No fuel, no air . . ."

"No anything," I finished grimly. "Of course, if we're only just outside the Moon's orbit, an ordinary rocket flier could reach us in time, but I don't think your dear uncle will be sending one. Not until he knows we are all safely dead, anyway. If I get back to Terra alive it will mean the gas chamber for him. He won't risk that even to save you, Zena."

She didn't faint, or even cry. Just stayed rather white about the lips.

It was Alrac who answered me. "It. . . It sounds bad, but maybe we can do something about it. Let's explore the ship."

We had been so wrapped up in our own troubles that it wasn't until we turned away from the useless Hoydons to follow the lad's suggestion that we remembered the little man who had been handling the rupter. He was still lying where we had left him. Hadn't moved an inch. And looking at him now I knew that he never would move an inch.

"We'll dump the body in the cell. It'll be out of the way there while we explore the rest of the ship," I said.

We soon found that there wasn't much to explore, except what we had already seen.

There was, of course, a pilot's chamber, containing manual controls for the rocket tubes that had been used to get the ship out here, and automatic controls for a smaller jet at the side. The larger rockets had been fueled by piping direct from the Hoydons bank, and they were dead, but the minor one was supplied with an emergency tank and was still chugging away steadily.

The rest of the main body of the ship was taken up by what seemed to be an unused refreshment room. In it were a table, two chairs, a small water tank, and a

coffee percolator. There wasn't even any coffee.

The observation ports were in smaller chambers of their own, at each end of the ship. Since she was revolving on her longitudinal axis to get gravity effect, this was the only place that they could be. I lingered for a moment at one of them. Terra loomed pretty big from where we were. A huge, mist-flecked opal. Filled half the visible sky. But she still seemed further away than she had when I was a hundred light years on the way to Betelgeuse.

IV

AT THE end of our little tour we gathered in the room with the chairs, and sat around staring gloomily at each other. Before long the atmosphere began to feel stuffy. Purely a psychological effect, of course. Actually there was enough air to last us a day or so.

None of us had spoken for twenty minutes when suddenly young Alrac burst out with his bright idea. "The water in that tank!" he exclaimed. "Couldn't we do something with that? I read a story once where two men brought their ship in on water in an emergency."

"It might be possible if we had any means of breaking it down atomically," I said. "But used purely as steam power, it wouldn't shift us more than a couple of feet out of orbit. And even if that were any use to us, we've nothing to boil it with."

Zena sniffed, then walked over to me and slipped her hand ostentatiously through my arm. "Think hard, Voyager," she said. "There's got to be some way out. What about that jet that's still working? What's that there for?"

"That just keeps us in line with the beam from the Betelgeuse expedition," I said. "There isn't enough fuel in that little tank to feed the main jets for more than five minutes, if that's what you're thinking."

"Well, what about the broken Hoydons bank? Couldn't you mend it?"

"I'll try," I said. "Though I don't know much about the things."

I was being even more truthful than she realized. To be precise, my total knowledge of the interior of a Hoydons consisted of

two facts. There are a lot of tubes in there. And there are a lot of wires in there.

I had more than an inkling that this fund of knowledge would prove insufficient. It did.

When I pried open the broken casing we found that three of the biggest tubes had been shattered, and that half a dozen wires had been torn from their sockets. At least they looked as if they had. Maybe they were meant to be that way. I really wouldn't know. Anyway, after one look nobody even bothered to ask me if I thought I could put things right.

Alrac had the next idea. "What about the receptor that you came through?" he said. "That wasn't in the bank, so it should still be working. Couldn't we adapt it in some way?"

"It's a receptor, and we need a transmitter," I said heavily. "It would take a better technician than I am to alter one into the other. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" asked Zena.

"Unless we can make use of it as a receptor." I grew excited as the idea began to take shape. "All the Hoydons transmissions to and from the Betelgeuse expedition are done on the same wave length. If we could just shift that receptor around until it is in line with the fuel beam from Terra . . ."

Luckily the unit was battery operated, so we didn't have any leads to disconnect and reconnect. But it was heavy. It took all three of us to edge it around an inch at a time. And as I didn't have any idea of the relative positions of the various transmitters in the Betelgeuse expedition bank we had to work purely at random. Shift, stop, switch on, switch off, shift, stop, switch on, switch off.

It took a full hour's grunting and sweating and swearing before we managed it. It was worth it, though, to see the beautiful flood of silvery-gray liquid that came welling out when at last we found the right position.

"Now," I said, "we need something to carry it in, so that we can take it to the rocket chamber."

Our spirits got a little damped when we came to make a survey of the available receptacles. There wasn't a bucket on the

ship. The water tank was bolted into place and couldn't be shifted without tools. And none of us were wearing hats. In the end we had to fall back on the coffee percolator and the two cups.

THE tank that fed the position correcting jet was half empty by this time, and since we dared not get off the beam, it was in this that we first concentrated. It was maddening work. Every time we switched on the Hoydons, gallons of fuel came pouring out. And we could scoop up just two cups and a percolator full, to rush away to the other end of the ship. And even with that pitifully little amount we couldn't move too fast or we would simply slosh it over.

We made so many journeys that we lost count of them. I was sweating and out of breath. Zena, I could see, was stumbling a little. Even Alrac showed signs of tiredness.

And . . . The tank that fed the position correcting jet was still half empty!

In the end I flung my cup down, shattering it on the floor.

"Forget it," I gasped wearily. "The little jet's eating the stuff as fast as we can fetch it. What chance have we got of ever gathering enough to feed the big one?"

Zena leaned against the wall, her face white and strained. She still wasn't crying, but she was near to it.

The fuel we had spilled was sloshing round our ankles by now. It wasn't dangerous or anything. Its flash point was too high for it to ignite anywhere but in a rocket tube, and it didn't become radioactive until it reached certain temperature. But it was cold and dank and mighty unpleasant.

Avoiding each other's eyes we wandered back to the room with the chairs. At least it was dry under foot in there.

I was beginning to think seriously of reviving my original suggestion that we should open a port hole just to get it over quickly, when Zena burst out.

"Oh, it's so utterly maddening. All that fuel, and we can't do anything but slop it all over the place." Her voice began to rise with the note of incipient hysteria. "And those silly operators sitting at the other end of the beam, just sending it and send-

ing it. I wish we could slap it right back at them."

"Wait a minute!" I controlled my voice. No sense in getting excited and then being let down as we were before. "Wait a minute! We can do that. If a receptor is very slightly off tune and still directly on the beam it just won't take the transmitted article. Sort of bounces it right back. I got a banded nose that way once."

"And how will that help us?" grunted Alrac. "If we bounce their fuel back at them we won't do anything but make the dials on their gauges go crazy. The stuff's piped up to their transmitters."

"I know that," I said patiently. "I wasn't thinking of playing practical jokes by splashing fuel over them. My idea was to send them a message by D.D. If we keep it up long enough surely someone will notice that the gauge needles aren't just flying about at random."

"What's D.D.?" asked Zena.

"Short for dot-dash," I explained. "It's adapted from a code originated a long time ago by an Earthman named Morse. It's seldom used now that Hoydons have made it so simple to send a written letter or make a personal contact. But it's still a compulsory subject in the training of all interstellar crews, voyaging or operating."

IT TOOK us a few minutes to decide just what message to send. We wanted to make it as brief as possible, but there seemed to be so much that just had to go in. Finally we worked it out to our satisfaction, and I scribbled it down.

Wrecked ship in line your beam. Crew need rescue. Acknowledge receipt by beam.

The operator from whom I learned the trick hadn't shown me how much a Hoydons should be off tune to get the effect we needed, so I just played around, sending the message over and over, each time turning the dials a tiny fraction one way or the other off the standard setting, then, every five minutes or so, returning them to their correct position.

Before long I had let through so much fuel that it began to run over the floor sill and creep round the whole ship. I started to worry. Too much of this wouldn't be

safe. If the fuel got so deep that it reached the ignition chamber of the positioning jet the whole ship would go up in flame.

I corrected the dial reading for the last time, and there came not a flood of gray liquid but a small white sheet of write-met.

With a whoop of joy I grabbed it and read aloud the answer that had been scribbled across it with a pocket stylus.

Your position checked. Rescue ship on way. Now for Pluto's sake get off beam and let's get some fuel through to the Betelgeuse people.

Zena began laughing and crying at the same time. Alrac yelled with delight, clapped me on the back, and began a little jig, splashing his uniform with fuel as he danced.

Then Zena dashed over to me, flung her arms round my neck, and kissed me enthusiastically. I'm not going to pretend I didn't enjoy it, but Alrac stopped his high stepping, and began to look rather like a spanked puppy.

I glanced at the girl's sparkling face, and then at him.

"Well," I said brusquely. "At the very least we've got a couple of hours to wait. I think I'd better leave you two on your own a bit. You've probably got a lot to talk over."

Alrac opened his mouth, but Zena beat him to it and took charge of things. "We haven't a thing to say to each other. Please stay, Voyager."

An awkward silence fell over the three of us.

I broke it, trying to make my voice as briskly cheerful as possible. "Well, why are we all staring at each other like Martian pop-eye bugs? We should be shouting our heads off. We're safe, the T.N.A.L. is as good as smashed."

"I know," said Zena softly. "And I'm glad, even though they are my own relatives. But—I've got something I want to say before the rescue ship comes, and you get caught up in a crowd of hero-worshippers."

She paused, and had the grace to blush a little. Her eyes were appealing to me to help her out. I didn't intend to, so I kept my mouth shut.

She began again. "You must understand,

Voyager, that many things have changed since you were on Terra last. We women are different. The modern girl isn't like her grandmother, all shy and swoony, content to wait with folded hands until the right man comes along, and then do nothing about it but sit primly in the corner and hope that he will condescend to notice her. If we meet someone we like we . . ."

"So you've got back to that sort of modernity again, have you?" I butted in. "How the pendulum swings! The girls were being up-to-date in just that way during my furlough before last. But during my last one they were wearing skirts down to their ankles, and blushing asking dear mama's permission before they spoke to a man."

She shrugged the interruption aside impatiently. "Maybe," she said, "anyway, we aren't that way now. So you see, Voyager."

"Listen to me for a moment, Zena," I interrupted again. "I told you once I had a pretty good personal reason for hating the T.N.A.L., apart from my general convictions that their ideas are all wet."

"I know you did," she replied wonderingly, "but . . ."

"LET me finish," I insisted. "I want to tell you about that personal reason. You see, after I had been a Voyager for a year—our time, I mean, not Terra's—I met a girl. She was young, and pretty. Rather like you, my dear. We fell in love. As you probably know, a Voyager only has to contract with the Science Council for a year. After that he may leave at the end of any spell of duty. So we arranged that I should leave them and find employment on Terra, and then we should settle down and be happy. We did—for a while."

I broke off. Had to, to save making a fool of myself. It all happened a long, long time ago, but it was still fresh to me.

Zena's eyes were soft and sympathetic. "Yes?" she prompted. "What happened then?"

"Her family didn't approve of Voyagers. Not even ex-Voyagers. They were T.N.A.L. men. So they got to work to poison her

mind against me. They were old hands at intrigue, and I'm afraid my own temper made things easier for them. In the end she left me, taking our baby with her. I tried to find her, to patch things up, but once they had got her away from me her family hid her too well. So finally I gave up and went back Voyaging."

Zena put a hand out to me. "I'm sorry it happened," she whispered. "Terribly sorry. But . . . well, she's gone now, isn't she? Oh, I don't mean to sound hard, but don't you see that that's all over and done with? You must make a new life."

I looked at her, feeling several kinds of a brute. What I had to say next was going to hurt her. Both her feelings and her pride. Then I glanced over my shoulder at the six feet of dumb misery who was hanging around by the door, trying not to be so rude as to listen to us, trying even more nobly not to hate my guts.

He was a nice kid, even if he wasn't a romantic story book Space Rover. Sure, Zena would be hurt. But not too much, nor for too long.

I took a deep breath. "I don't think you understand, even now," I said. "Hasn't it ever occurred to you to wonder why there should be a rebel branch in your family at all, when most of them are so fanatically devoted to the T.N.A.L.? Hasn't it ever occurred to you to wonder why, out of all the hundreds of Voyagers there are, I should be the one to have my picture preserved, the one to be remembered as a heroic legend?"

I turned from her and called across the room. "Alrac. Come over here."

He came, hesitantly. I waved to the girl. "Let me introduce you. This is Zena, my great, great, I wouldn't know how exactly how many greats, granddaughter."

They goggled at each other, and I started to escape. "And bless you both, my children," I added over my shoulder.

Then I went into the observation chamber at the Terrawards end of the ship to watch for the first glimpse of the rescue ship's scarlet rocket flame.



THE LOST TRIBES OF VENUS

By ERIK FENNEL

On mist-shrouded Venus, where hostile swamp meets hostile sea . . . there did Barry Barr—Earthman transmuted—swap his Terran heritage for the deep dark waters of Tana; for the strangely beautiful Xintel of the blue-brown skin.

EVIL luck brought the meteorite to those particular space-time coordinates as Number Four rode the downhill spiral toward Venus. The football-sized chunk of nickel-iron and rock overtook the ship at a relative speed of only a few hundred miles per hour and passed close enough to come within the tremendous pseudo-gravatic fields of the idling drivers.

It swerved into a paraboloid course, fol-

lowing the flux lines, and was dragged directly against one of the three projecting nozzles. Energy of motion was converted to heat and a few meteoric fragments fused themselves to the nonmetallic tube casing.

In the jet room the positronic line accelerator for that particular driver fouled under the intolerable overload, and the backsurge sent searing heat and deadly radiation blasting through the compartment



before the main circuit breakers could clack open.

The bellow of the alarm horn brought Barry Barr fully awake, shattering a delightfully intimate dream of the dark haired girl he hoped to see again soon in Venus Colony. As he unbuckled his bunk straps and started aft at a floating, bounding run his weightlessness told him instantly that Number Four was in free fall with dead drivers.

Red warning lights gleamed wickedly above the safety-locked jet room door, and Nick Podtiaguine, the air machines specialist, was manipulating the emergency controls with Captain Reno at his elbow. One by one the crew crowded into the corridor and watched in tense silence.

The automatic lock clicked off as the jet room returned to habitable conditions, and at Captain Reno's gesture two men swung the door open. Quickly the commander entered the blasted jet room, Barry Barr was close behind him.

Robson Hind, jet chief of Four and electronics expert for Venus Colony, hung back until others had gone in first. His handsome, heavy face had lost its usual ruddiness.

Captain Reno surveyed the havoc. Young Ryan's body floated eerily in the zero gravity, charred into instant death by the backblast. The line accelerator was a shapeless ruin, but except for broken meter glasses and scorched control handles other mechanical damage appeared minor. They had been lucky.

"Turnover starts in six hours twelve minutes," the captain said meaningfully.

Robson Hind cleared his throat. "We can change accelerators in two hours," he declared. With a quick reassumption of authority he began to order his crew into action.

It took nearer three hours than two to change accelerators despite Hind's shouted orders.

At last the job was completed. Hind made a final check, floated over to the control panel and started the fuel feed. With a confident smile he threw in the accelerator switch.

The meter needles climbed, soared past the red lines without pausing, and just in

time to prevent a second blowback, Hind cut the power.

"*There's metal in the field!*" His voice was high and unsteady.

EVERYONE knew what that meant. The slightest trace of magnetic material would distort the delicately balanced cylinder of force that contained and directed the Hoskins blast, making it suicidal to operate.

Calmly Captain Reno voiced the thought in every mind.

"It must be cleared. From the outside."

Several of the men swore under their breaths. Interplanetary space was constantly bombarded, with an intensity inverse to the prevailing gravitation, by something called Sigma radiation. Man had never encountered it until leaving Earth, and little was known of it except that short exposure killed test animals and left their bodies unpredictably altered.

Inside the ship it was safe enough, for the sleek hull was charged with a Kendall power-shield, impervious to nearly any Sigma concentration. But the shielding devices in the emergency spacesuits were small and had never been space-tested in a region of nearly equalized gravitations.

The man who emerged from the airlock would be flipping a coin with a particularly unpleasant form of death.

Many pairs of eyes turned toward Robson Hind. He was jet chief.

"I'm assigned, not expendable," he protested hastily. "If there were more trouble later . . ." His face was pasty.

Assigned. That was the key word. Barry Barr felt a lump tightening in his stomach as the eyes shifted to him. He had some training in Hoskins drivers. He knew alloys and power tools. And he was riding Four unassigned after that broken ankle had made him miss Three. He was the logical man.

"For the safety of the ship." That phrase, taken from the ancient Earthbound code of the sea, had occurred repeatedly in the indoctrination manual at Training Base. He remembered it, and remembered further the contingent plans regarding assigned and unassigned personnel.

For a moment he stood indecisively, the

nervous, unhumorous smile quirking across his angular face making him look more like an untried boy than a structural engineer who had fought his way up through some of the toughest tropical construction camps of Earth. His lean body, built more for quick, neatly coordinated action than brute power, balanced handily in the zero gravity as he ran one hand through his sandy hair in a gesture of uncertainty.

He knew that not even the captain would order him through the airlock.

But the members of the Five Ship Plan had been selected in part for a sense of responsibility.

"Nick, will you help me button up?" he asked with forced calmness.

For an instant he thought he detected a sly gleam in Hind's eyes. But then the jet chief was pressing forward with the others to shake his hand.

Rebellious reluctance flared briefly in Barry's mind. Dorothy Voorhees had refused to make a definite promise before blasting off in Three—in fact he hadn't even seen her during her last few days on Earth. But still he felt he had the inside track despite Hind's money and the brash assurance that went with it. But if Hind only were to reach Venus alive—

THE blazing disc of Sol, the minor globes of the planets, the unwinking pinpoints of the stars, all stared with cosmic disinterest at the tiny figure crawling along the hull. His spacesuit trapped and amplified breathing and heartbeats into a roaring chaos that was an invitation to blind panic, and all the while there was consciousness of the insidiously deadly Sigma radiations.

Barry found the debris of the meteorite, an ugly shining splotch against the dull superceramic tube, readied his power chisel, started cutting. Soon it became a tedious, torturingly strenuous manual task requiring little conscious thought, and Barry's mind touched briefly on the events that had brought him here.

First Luna, and that had been murderous. Man had encountered Sigma for the first time, and many had died before the Kendall shield was perfected. And the chemical-fueled rockets of those days had been inherently poor.

Hoskins semi-atomics had made possible the next step—to Mars. But men had found Mars barren, swept clear of all life in the cataclysm that had shattered the trans-Martian planet to form the Asteroid Belt.

Venus, its true surface forever hidden by enshrouding mists, had been well within one-way range. But Hoskins fuel requirements for a round trip added up to something beyond critical mass. Impossible.

But the Five Ship Plan had evolved, a joint enterprise of government and various private groups. Five vessels were to go out, each fueled to within a whiskered neutron of spontaneous detonation, manned by specialists who, it was hoped, could maintain themselves under alien conditions.

On Venus the leftover fuel from all five would be transferred to whichever ship had survived the outbound voyage in best condition. That one would return to Earth. Permanent base or homeward voyage with colonists crowded aboard like defeated sardines? Only time would tell.

Barry Barr had volunteered, and because the enlightened guesses of the experts called for men and women familiar with tropical conditions, he had survived the rigorous weeding-out process. His duties in Venus Colony would be to refabricate the discarded ships into whatever form was most needed—most particularly a launching ramp—and to study native Venusian materials.

Dorothy Voorhees had signed on as toxicologist and dietician. When the limited supply of Earth food ran out the Colony would be forced to rely upon Venusian plants and animals. She would guard against subtle delayed-action poisons, meanwhile devising ways of preparing Venusian materials to suit Earth tastes and digestions.

Barry had met her at Training Base and known at once that his years of loneliness had come to an end.

She seemed utterly independent, self-contained, completely intellectual despite her beauty, but Barry had not been deceived. From the moment of first meeting he had sensed within her deep springs of suppressed emotion, and he had understood. He too had come up the hard way, alone, and been forced to develop a shell of hardness and cold, single-minded devotion to

his work. Gradually, often unwillingly under his insistence, her aloofness had begun to melt.

But Robson Hind too had been attracted. He was the only son of the business manager of the great Hoskins Corporation which carried a considerable share in the Five Ship Plan. Dorothy's failure to virtually fall into his arms had only piqued his desires.

The man's smooth charm had fascinated the girl and his money had opened to her an entirely new world of lavish nightclubs and extravagantly expensive entertainments, but her inborn shrewdness had sensed some factor in his personality that had made her hesitate.

Barry had felt a distrust of Hind apart from the normal dislike of rivalry. He had looked forward to being with Dorothy aboard Three, and had made no secret of his satisfaction when Hind's efforts to have himself transferred to Three also or the girl to Four had failed.

But then a scaffold had slipped while Three was being readied, and with a fractured ankle he had been forced to miss the ship.

He unclipped the magnetic detector from his belt and ran it inch by inch over the nozzle. He found one spot of metal, pin-head-sized, but enough to cause trouble, and once more swung his power chisel into stuttering action.

Then it was done.

As quickly as possible he inched back to the airlock. Turnover had to start according to calculations.

BARRY opened his eyes. The ship was in normal deceleration and Nick Podtiaguine was watching him from a nearby bunk.

"I could eat a cow with the smallpox," Barry declared.

Nick grinned. "No doubt. You slept around the clock and more. Nice job of work out there."

Barry unhitched his straps and sat up.

"Say," he asked anxiously. "What's haywire with the air?"

Nick looked startled. "Nothing. Everything checked out when I came off watch a few minutes ago."

Barry shrugged. "Probably just me. Guess I'll go see if I can mooch a handout."

He found himself a hero. The cook was ready to turn the galley inside out while a radio engineer and an entomologist hovered near to wait on him. But he couldn't enjoy the meal. The sensations of heat and dryness he had noticed on awakening grew steadily worse. It became difficult to breathe.

He started to rise, and abruptly the room swirled and darkened around him. Even as he sank into unconsciousness he knew the answer.

The suit's Kendall-shield had leaked!

Four plunged toward Venus tail first, the Hoskins jets flaring ahead. The single doctor for the Colony had gone out in Two and the crewmen trained in first aid could do little to relieve Barry's distress. Fainting spells alternated with fever and delirium and an unquenchable thirst. His breathing became increasingly difficult.

A few thousand miles out Four picked up a microbeam. A feeling of exultation surged through the ship as Captain Reno passed the word, for the beam meant that some Earthmen were alive upon Venus. They were not necessarily diving straight toward oblivion. Barry, sick as he was, felt the thrill of the unknown world that lay ahead.

Into a miles-thick layer of opacity Four roared, with Captain Reno himself jockeying throttles to keep it balanced on its self-created support of flame.

"You're almost in," a voice chanted into his headphones through crackling, sizzling static. "Easy toward spherical one-thirty. Hold it! Lower. Lower. CUT YOUR POWER!"

The heavy hull dropped sickeningly, struck with a mushy thud, settled, steadied.

Barry was weak, but with Nick Podtiaguine steadying him he was waiting with the others when Captain Reno gave the last order.

"Airlock open. Both doors."

Venusian air poured in.

"For this I left Panama?" one of the men yelped.

"Enough to gag a maggot," another agreed with hand to nose.

It was like mid-summer noon in a tropical mangrove swamp, hot and unbearably

humid and overpowering with the stench of decaying vegetation.

But Barry took one deep breath, then another. The stabbing needles in his chest blunted, and the choking band around his throat loosened.

The outer door swung wide. He blinked, and a shift in the encompassing vapors gave him his first sight of a world bathed in subdued light.

Four had landed in a marsh with the midships lock only a few feet above a quagmire surface still steaming from the final rocket blast. Nearby the identical hulls of Two and Three stood upright in the mud. The mist shifted again and beyond the swamp he could see the low, rounded outlines of the collapsible buildings Two and Three had carried in their cargo pits. They were set on a rock ledge rising a few feet out of the marsh. The Colony!

Men were tossing sections of lattice duck-board out upon the swamp, extending a narrow walkway toward Four's airlock, and within a few minutes the new arrivals were scrambling down.

Barry paid little attention to the noisy greetings and excited talk. Impatiently he trotted toward the rock ledge, searching for one particular figure among the men and women who waited.

"Dorothy!" he said fervently.

Then his arms were around her and she was responding to his kiss.

Then unexpected pain tore at his chest. Her lovely face took on an expression of fright even as it wavered and grew dim. The last thing he saw was Robson Hind looming beside her.

By the glow of an overhead tubelight he recognized the kindly, deeply lined features of the man bending over him, Dr. Carl Jensen, specialist in tropical diseases. He tried to sit up but the doctor laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Water!" Barry croaked.

The doctor held out a glass. Then his eyes widened incredulously as his patient deliberately drew in a breath while drinking, sucking water directly into his lungs.

"Doctor," he asked, keeping his voice low to spare his throat: "What are my chances? On the level."

Dr. Jensen shook his head thoughtfully.

"There's not a thing—not a damned solitary thing—I can do. It's something new to medical science."

Barry lay still.

"Your body is undergoing certain radical changes," the doctor continued, "and you know as much—more about your condition than I do. If a normal person who took water into his lungs that way didn't die of a coughing spasm, congestive pneumonia would get him sure. But it seems to give you relief."

Barry scratched his neck, where a thickened, darkening patch on each side itched infuriatingly.

"What are these changes?" he asked. "What's this?"

"Those things seem to be—" the doctor began hesitantly. "Damn it, I know it sounds crazy but they're rudimentary gills."

Barry accepted the outrageous statement unemotionally. He was beyond shock.

"But there must be—"

Pain struck again, so intense his body twisted and arched involuntarily. Then the prick of a needle brought merciful oblivion.

II

BARRY'S mind was working furiously. The changes the Sigma radiations had inflicted upon his body might reverse themselves spontaneously, Dr. Jensen had mentioned during a second visit—but for that to happen he must remain alive. That meant easing all possible strains.

When the doctor came in again Barry asked him to find Nick Podtiaguine. Within a few minutes the mechanic appeared.

"Cheez, it's good to see you, Barry," he began.

"Stuff it," the sick man interrupted. "I want favors. Can do?"

Nick nodded vigorously.

"First cut that air conditioner and get the window open."

Nick stared as though he were demented, but obeyed, unbolting the heavy plastic window panel and lifting it aside. He made a face at the damp, malodorous Venusian air but to Barry it brought relief.

It was not enough, but it indicated he was on the right track. And he was not an engineer for nothing.

"Got a pencil?" he asked.

He drew only a rough sketch, for Nick was far too competent to need detailed drawings.

"Think you can get materials?"

Nick glanced at the sketch. "Hell, man, for you I can get anything the Colony has. You saved Four and everybody knows it."

"Two days?"

Nick looked insulted.

He was back in eight hours, and with him came a dozen helpers. A power line and water tube were run through the metal partition to the corridor, connections were made, and the machine Barry had sketched was ready.

Nick flipped the switch. The thing whined shrilly. From a fanshaped nozzle came innumerable droplets of water, droplets of colloidal size that hung in the air and only slowly coalesced into larger drops that fell toward the metal floor.

Barry nodded, a smile beginning to spread across his drawn features.

"Perfect. Now put the window back."

Outside lay the unknown world of Venus, and an open, unguarded window might invite disaster.

A few hours later Dr. Jensen found his patient in a normal sleep. The room was warm and the air was so filled with water-mist it was almost liquid. Coalescing drops dripped from the walls and curving ceiling and furniture, from the half clad body of the sleeping man, and the scavenger pump made greedy gulping sounds as it removed excess water from the floor.

The doctor shook his head as he backed out, his clothes clinging wet from the short exposure.

It was abnormal.

But so was Barry Barr.

With breathing no longer a continuous agony Barry began to recover some of his strength. But for several days much of his time was spent in sleep and Dorothy Voorhees haunted his dreams.

Whenever he closed his eyes he could see her as clearly as though she were with him—her face with the exotic high cheekbones—her eyes a deep gray in fascinating contrast to her raven hair—lips that seemed to promise more of giving than she had ever allowed herself to fulfil—her incon-

gruously pert, humorous little nose that was a legacy from some venturesome Irishman—her slender yet firmly lithe body.

After a few days Dr. Jensen permitted him to have visitors. They came in a steady stream, the people from Four and men he had not seen since Training Base days, and although none could endure his semiliquid atmosphere more than a few minutes at a time Barry enjoyed their visits.

But the person for whom he waited most anxiously did not arrive. At each knock Barry's heart would leap, and each time he settled back with a sigh of disappointment. Days passed and still Dorothy did not come to him. He could not go to her, and stubborn pride kept him from even inquiring. All the while he was aware of Robson Hind's presence in the Colony, and only weakness kept him from pacing his room like a caged animal.

Through his window he could see nothing but the gradual brightening and darkening of the enveloping fog as the slow 82-hour Venusian day progressed, but from his visitors' words he learned something of Venusian conditions and the story of the Colony.

Number One had bumbled in on visual, the pilot depending on the smeary images of infra-sight goggles. An inviting grassy plain had proved to be a layer of algae floating on quicksand. Frantically the crew had blasted down huge balsa-like marsh trees, cutting up the trunks with flame guns to make crude rafts. They had performed fantastic feats of strength and endurance but managed to salvage only half their equipment before the shining nose of One had vanished in the gurgling ooze.

Lost in a steaming, stinking marsh teeming with alien creatures that slithered and crawled and swam and flew, blinded by the eternal fog, the crew had proved the rightness of their choice as pioneers. For weeks they had floundered across the deadly terrain until at last, beside a stagnant-looking slough that drained sluggishly into a warm, almost tideless sea a mile away, they had discovered an outcropping of rock. It was the only solid ground they had encountered.

One man had died, his swamp suit pierced by a poisonous thorn, but the others had hand-hauled the radio beacon

piece by piece and set it up in time to guide Two to a safe landing. Houses had been assembled, the secondary power units of the spaceship put to work, and the colony had established a tenuous foothold.

Three had landed beside Two a few months later, bringing reinforcements, but the day-by-day demands of the little colony's struggle for survival had so far been too pressing to permit extended or detailed explorations. Venus remained a planet of unsolved mysteries.

The helicopter brought out in Three had made several flights which by radar and sound reflection had placed vague outlines on the blank maps. The surface appeared to be half water, with land masses mainly jungle-covered swamp broken by a few rocky ledges, but landings away from base had been judged too hazardous.

Test borings from the ledge had located traces of oil and radioactive minerals, while enough Venusian plants had proven edible to provide an adequate though monotonous food source.

Venus was the diametric opposite of lifeless Mars. Through the fog gigantic insects hummed and buzzed like lost airplanes, but fortunately they were harmless and timid.

In the swamps wildly improbable life forms grew and reproduced and fought and died, and many of those most harmless in appearance possessed surprisingly venomous characteristics.

The jungle had been flamed away in a huge circle around the colony to minimize the chances of surprise by anything that might attack, but the blasting was an almost continuous process. The plants of Venus grew with a vigor approaching fury.

Most spectacular of the Venusian creatures were the amphibious armored monsters, saurian or semi-saurians with a slight resemblance to the brontosauri that had once lived on Earth, massive swamp-dwellers that used the slough beside the colony's ledge as a highway. They were apparently vegetarians, but thorough stupidity in tremendous bulk made them dangerous. One had damaged a building by blundering against it, and since then the colony had remained alert, using weapons to repel the beasts.

The most important question—that of

the presence or absence of intelligent, civilized Venusians—remained unanswered. Some of the men reported a disquieting feeling of being watched, particularly when near open water, but others argued that any intelligent creatures would have established contact.

BARRY developed definite external signs of what the Sigma radiation had done to him. The skin between his fingers and toes spread, grew into membranous webs. The swellings in his neck became more pronounced and dark parallel lines appeared.

But despite the doctor's pessimistic reports that the changes had not stopped, Barry continued to tell himself he was recovering. He had to believe and keep on believing to retain sanity in the face of the weird, unclassifiable feelings that surged through his body. Still he was subject to fits of almost suicidal depression, and Dorothy's failure to visit him did not help his mental condition.

Then one day he woke from a nap and thought he was still dreaming. Dorothy was leaning over him.

"Barry! Barry!" she whispered. "I can't help it. I love you even if you do have a wife and child in Philadelphia. I know it's wrong but all that seems so far away it doesn't matter any more." Tears glistened in her eyes.

"Huh?" he grunted. "Who? Me?"

"Please, Barry, don't lie. She wrote to me before Three blasted off—oh, the most piteous letter!"

Barry was fully awake now. "I'm not married. I have no child. I've never been in Philadelphia," he shouted. His lips thinned. "I—think—I—know—who—wrote—that—letter!" he declared grimly.

"Robson wouldn't!" she objected, shocked, but there was a note of doubt in her voice.

Then she was in his arms, sobbing openly.

"I believe you, Barry."

She stayed with him for hours, and she had changed since the days at Training Base. Long months away from the patterned restraints of civilization, living each day on the edge of unknown perils, had awakened

in her the realization that she was a human being and a woman, as well as a toxicologist.

When the water-mist finally forced her departure she left Barry joyous and confident of his eventual recovery. For a few minutes anger simmered in his brain as he contemplated the pleasure of rearranging Robson Hind's features.

The accident with the scaffold had been remarkably convenient, but this time the ruthless, restless, probably psychopathic drive that had made Robson Hind more than just another rich man's spoiled son had carried him too far. Barry wondered whether it had been inefficiency or judiciously distributed money that had made the psychometrists overlook some undesirable traits in Hind's personality in accepting him for the Five Ship Plan.

But even with his trickery Hind had lost. He slept, and woke with a feeling of doom.

The slow Venusian twilight had ended in blackness and the overhead tubelight was off.

He sat up, and apprehension gave way to burning torture in his chest.

Silence! He fumbled for the light switch, then knelt beside the mist machine that no longer hummed. Power and water supplies were both dead, cut off outside his room.

Floating droplets were merging and falling to the floor. Soon the air would be dry, and he would be choking and strangling. He turned to call for help.

The door was locked!

He tugged and the knob came away in his hand. The retaining screw had been removed.

He beat upon the panel, first with his fists and then with the metal doorknob, but the insulation between the double alloy sheets was efficient soundproofing. Furiously he hurled himself upon it, only to bounce back with a bruised shoulder. He was trapped.

Working against time and eventual death he snatched a metal chair and swung with all his force at the window, again, again, yet again. A small crack appeared in the transparent plastic, branched under continued hammering, became a rough star. He gathered his waning strength, then

swung once more. The tough plastic shattered.

He tugged at the jagged pieces still clinging to the frame. Fog-laden Venusian air poured in—but it was not enough!

He dragged himself head first through the narrow opening, landed sprawling on hands and knees in the darkness. In his ears a confused rustling drone from the alien swamp mingled with the roar of approaching unconsciousness.

There was a smell in his nostrils. The smell of water. He lurched forward at a shambling run, stumbling over the uneven ground.

Then he plunged from the rocky ledge into the slough. Flashes of colored light flickered before his eyes as he went under. But Earth habits were still strong; instinctively he held his breath.

Then he fainted. Voluntary control of his body vanished. His mouth hung slack and the breathing reflex that had been an integral part of his life since the moment of birth forced him to inhale.

Bubbles floated upward and burst. Then Barry Barr was lying in the ooze of the bottom. And he was breathing, extracting vital oxygen from the brackish, silt-clouded water.

III

SLOWLY his racing heartbeat returned to normal. Gradually he became aware of the stench of decaying plants and of musky taints he knew instinctively were the scents of underwater animals. Then with a shock the meaning became clear. He had become a water-breather, cut off from all other Earthmen, no longer entirely human. His fellows in the colony were separated from him now by a gulf more absolute than the airless void between Earth and Venus.

Something slippery and alive touched him near one armpit. He opened his eyes in the black water and his groping hand clutched something burrowing into his skin. With a shudder of revulsion he crushed a fat worm between his fingers.

Then dozens of them—hundreds—were upon him from all sides. He was wearing only a pair of khaki pants but the worms

ignored his chest to congregate around his face, intent on attacking the tender skin of his eyelids.

For a minute his flailing hands fought them off, but they came in increasing numbers and clung like leeches. Pain spread as they bit and burrowed, and blindly he began to swim.

Faster and faster. He could sense the winding banks of the slough and kept to midchannel, swimming with his eyes tightly closed. One by one the worms dropped off.

He stopped, opened his eyes, not on complete darkness this time but on a faint blue-green luminescence from far below. The water was saltier here, and clearer.

He had swum down the slough and out into the ocean. He tried to turn back, obsessed by a desire to be near the colony even though he could not go ashore without strangling, but he had lost all sense of direction.

He was still weak and his lungs were not completely adjusted to underwater life. Again he grew dizzy and faint. The slow movements of hands and feet that held him just below the surface grew feeble and ceased. He sank.

Down into dimly luminous water he dropped, and with his respiratory system completely water-filled there was no sensation of pressure. At last he floated gently to the bottom and lay motionless.

Shouting voices awakened him, an exultant battle cry cutting through a gasping scream of anguish. Streaks of bright orange light were moving toward him in a twisting pattern. At the head of each trail was a figure. A human figure that weaved and swam in deadly moving combat. One figure drifted limply bottomward.

Hallucination, Barry told himself. Then one of the figures broke from the group. Almost overhead it turned sharply downward and the feet moved in a powerful flutter-kick. A slender spear aimed directly at the Earthman.

Barry threw himself aside. The spear point plunged deep into the sticky, yielding bottom and Barry grappled with its wielder.

Pointed fingernails raked his cheek. Barry's balled fist swung in a roundhouse blow but water resistance slowed the punch

to ineffectiveness. The creature only shook its head and came in kicking and clawing.

Barry braced his feet against the bottom and leaped. His head butted the attacker's chest and at the same instant he lashed a short jab to the creature's belly. It slumped momentarily, its face working.

Human—or nearly so—the thing was, with a stocky, powerful body and webbed hands and feet. A few scraps of clothing, seemingly worn more for ornament than covering, clung to the fishbelly-white skin. The face was coarse and savage.

It shook off the effects of Barry's punch and one webbed hand snatched a short tube from its belt.

Barry remembered the spring-opening knife in his pocket, and even as he flicked the blade out the tube-weapon fired. Sound thrummed in the water and the water grew milky with a myriad of bubbles. Something zipped past his head, uncomfortably close.

Then Barry struck, felt his knife slice flesh and grate against bone. He struck again even as the undersea being screamed and went limp.

Barry stared through the reddening water.

Another figure plunged toward him. Barry jerked the dead Venusian's spear from the mud and raised it defensively.

But the figure paid no attention. This one was a female who fled desperately from two men closing in from opposite sides. One threw his spear, using an odd pushing motion, and as she checked and dodged, the other was upon her from behind.

One arm went around her neck in a strangler's hold, bending her slender body backward. Together captor and struggling captive sank toward the bottom. The other recovered his thrown spear and moved in to help secure her arms and legs with lengths of cord.

One scooped up the crossbow the girl had dropped. The other ripped at her brief skirt and from her belt took a pair of tubes like the one the dead Venusian had fired at Barry, handling them as though they were loot of the greatest value. He jerked cruelly at the slender metallic necklace the girl wore but it did not break.

He punched the helpless girl in the abdomen with the butt of his spear. The girl

writhed but she did not attempt to cry out.

Barry bounded toward them in a series of soaring leaps, knife and spear ready. One Venusian turned to meet him, grinning maliciously.

Barry dug one foot into the bottom and sidestepped a spear thrust. His own lunge missed completely. Then he and the Venusian were inside each other's spear points, chest to chest. A pointed hook strapped to the inside of the creature's wrist just missed Barry's throat. The Earthman arched his body backward and his knife flashed upward. The creature gasped and pulled away, clutching with both hands at a gaping wound in its belly.

The other one turned too late as Barry leaped.

Barry's hilt cracked against its jawbone.

BARRY bent over the girl and realized with a start that she was different.

Her skin was a strange blue-brown. Her features were delicate, intelligent, very different from the savage faces of the males he had battled. Her dark hair grew further down the back of her neck than was customary on Earth, forming a short, silky mane between her shoulder blades.

She was slender of body, except that the muscles running down her sides from armpit to waist were amazingly well developed. Her high-set, compactly pointed breasts were uncovered, and he could see that any sort of upper clothing would interfere with full use of those unusual swimming muscles. Her skirt was short and close fitting.

Her eyes, though, were filled with hatred, defiance, terror.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, hoping his tone would convey the meaning.

She seemed more puzzled than grateful as he slid the knife gently between her ankles to sever the binding cords, and she shrank under his touch as he rolled her over to reach her wrists.

"There you are," he said, and started to straighten up.

Something struck him from above and many hands clutched at him. Within seconds he was flat in the mud. Two Venusians held each arm and leg.

Another stood over him with spear poised.

But the girl shouted and grasped the spearman's arm.

The girl spoke with rapid urgency, pointing from Barry to her erstwhile captors.

Barry could not believe his ears. The sounds were familiar. He could even understand a word here and there, and in these entirely alien surroundings the effect was eerie.

A Venusian looked at the pink clouds of diluted blood rising from the bodies, then gazed apprehensively up into the dimness overhead.

"Kill him quickly and let us go," he suggested. "The torvaks will soon come."

The girl turned upon him. "He lives!" she snapped. "From what yort he comes I know not, but assuredly he is no noru!"

Although his right arm was pinioned Barry still clutched his knife. Now the girl stooped and touched his fist without attempting to pry it open. Barry surrendered the weapon.

The men allowed him to sit up, but they remained wary. Meanwhile the girl was examining the knife with intense interest.

Barry smiled at her, and being careful to make no sudden motions that might be misinterpreted he held out his hand. Hesitantly she laid the knife on his palm while around him his guards raised their spears and crossbows.

He closed the blade. Then, showing her exactly how it was done, he pressed the button that let the five-inch blade snick out. Repeating the demonstration, he handed it back with a gesture indicating it was a gift.

The girl smiled and spoke to him, and although most of her words were unintelligible he gathered she was asking if he wanted to accompany them. Emphatically he nodded, overcome with a sudden dread of being left alone on the sea bottom.

Her suggestion created consternation among the others.

"We must consult Komso," one suggested uneasily.

The girl frowned. "We do not consult Komso," she contradicted. "I take full responsibility."

The man shrugged. "Let us go before the torvaks come," he evaded.

Weapons were slung for carrying and the

band leaped from the bottom and began swimming. Barry followed, keeping close beside the girl.

Although he relied more on power than skill he found himself able to maintain their fast pace. He soon caught the knack of using the webs between his fingers and toes.

And muscles trained under Earth gravity and without water support seemed superior to those of the Venusians.

The men talked as they swam, and Barry remembered where he had heard those particular combinations of sounds before.

A construction job had once taken him to an almost inaccessible mountain section of Mexico and there he had picked up a few words of the dialect used by the native Indian laborers. Aztec? Incan? Mayan? Something predating all three? He had no idea of its origin, but the similarity opened astounding trails of speculation.

The girl, he learned from hearing the others address her, was named Xintel.

AN UNDERSEA cliff loomed craggy and irregular ahead. As the group slanted up toward a black hole in its face the voices of the men took on tones of happy relief.

But the girl was frowning.

The group which had held together compactly during the long swim broke up, each man heading for the cave mouth at top speed. Barry saw that huge boulders had been piled one upon another to narrow the entrance until not more than three abreast could pass.

Xintel motioned to Barry to stay close behind her. She seemed to be anticipating trouble.

It came as they started to enter. A huge, bull-necked man with a well fed appearance in marked contrast to the lean muscularity of the other Venusians, stepped out and barred their passage, arms outflung. Heavy glittering bracelets jangled on his wrists. Something in the contrived melodrama of his gestures told Barry that unseen eyes were watching from the darkness.

"Xintel! What is this thing you bring to the portal of Tana?" the man asked harshly.

The girl stood her ground. "He comes with me!"

"He's an alien. He must die!" The man's tone was arrogant.

Xintel stiffened angrily. "He will not be killed, Komso. He is not a noru."

Komso's face reddened angrily. "But he is—" he began, and then stopped abruptly.

"You would take this one, then, into Tana itself?" His voice conveyed the impression that such a course was unheard of.

The girl nodded, motioning Barry to follow.

"Sacrilege! Offspring of a blasphemer!" Komso shouted.

Xintel did not pause.

Komso motioned and someone in the dark tunnel behind him placed a loaded crossbow in his hands. He swung the weapon to cover the Earthman.

"Over my dead body shall this alien thing enter Tana," he snarled.

Barry stood motionless and helpless, trying to conceal his fear.

Xintel's voice was coldly defiant. "So be it, then. Over your dead body, if you insist."

With a movement of feline grace and speed she snatched a tube-weapon from her belt. She was bluffing. Barry had seen the savages who had captured her test the weapons and find them unloaded. But Komso had not.

His face grew pale but his slitted eyes glared murder. "You bring your own death. I tried only to save you from the consequences of your folly."

He turned and swam into the opening.

Xintel did not allow herself the vestige of a smile. Instead she grabbed Barry's wrist and pulled him after her into the black hole. In the darkness she passed him his knife.

The passage was several hundred yards long but the girl guided him unerringly around its turns. The Earthman's nerves were jangling.

IV

THEY rounded a sharp bend and Barry gasped at the vista before him. The passage opened into a tremendous cavern.

Far below on the bowl-shaped floor sprawled a town composed of cylindrical houses higher than they were wide, scattered in an irregular pattern.

He looked upward for the source of the cold yellow light flooding everything, and a few yards above his head lay a flat silvery plane. Just below it the water glowed, like the phosphorescence that microscopic life forms cause in the tropic seas of Earth—but a thousand times brighter.

The men from Xintel's group had taken no part in her altercation with Komso save to watch in uneasy silence. Now they were scattering downward toward the houses. Nearly all had been joined by waiting women, but Barry saw two women swimming pitifully and dejectedly alone. The battle into which he had been precipitated had not been without its casualties.

He stared about as Xintel led him in a long dive. On the bottom were trees—he had no other name for them—with stiff trunks and snake-like branches supported by air-filled knobs.

Their pale leaves were covered with minute bubbles that gave them a frosty appearance despite the warmth of the water.

There were no streets or paths between the cylindrical houses, but in small areas around the entrances the bright varicolored seaweed-moss had been worn away by Venusian feet.

A few Venusians eyed them in curiosity as they swam downward, but none approached.

They touched bottom beside one of the houses. Xintel pushed aside a curtain covering the circular doorway. Barry saw the house was constructed by training and grafting a number of the large trees until they intertwined. Its foundations were the roots that clung to irregularities in the rocks.

There were no windows, and for a moment after the girl let the curtain fall into place it was pitch black. Then suddenly the circular room was brilliantly lighted.

From the ceiling hung a globe a foot in diameter, the translucent floatation chamber of some subaqueous plant. It was spinning at the end of a twisted cord, the luminous milky fluid it contained stirred by the motion.

Xintel sighed wearily and hung up her crossbow. Then with a graceful leap she vanished through a hatchway in the ceiling.

She returned, floating down with a pair

of pronged darts and a small round box with bubbles dribbling upward in a steady stream through the perforated lid. She opened it and, with a fingertip, smeared a dab of vermilion paste on the base of each dart. Then she pushed the missiles base first into her tube-weapons, twisting them until a latch caught.

Her weapons prepared, the girl turned back to the Earthman and made the universal gesture of eating. Barry had no idea how long it had been since he had eaten, and for the first time since the Sigma sickness began he was really hungry. He nodded.

She leaped upward and he followed her to a second windowless room above the first, then up through another hatchway to a third. This was the top of the house, for through an opening in the flat roof he could look up into open water. Several baskets, woven of strips of undersea wood and equipped with close-fitting lids, stood along the wall. In a wooden cage a few dozen strange fish swam sluggishly.

With her bare hands Xintel caught one and pulled it out. She picked up a dagger of the same material as the spears—an unfamiliar substance which Barry had had no chance to examine closely—and jumped to the open roof. She returned a few minutes later with the fish neatly cleaned and divided into halves.

Barry was hungry but Earth habits were still strong. The girl saw his involuntary grimace. She looked hurt. He forced himself to take a bite of the raw fish and to his amazement found it pleasant. Evidently his taste organs had changed with the rest of his body.

From the baskets Xintel took other foods of vegetable origin. Barry ate ravenously.

The cumulative effects of fatigue overwhelmed him even as he finished. He felt a sense of dreamlike unreality and detachment, as though nothing mattered. The girl too appeared tired but he could see she was bursting with curiosity. He appreciated her restraint in not bombarding him with questions. At her gesture he stepped through the hatch and floated down to the middle room.

The light there had gone dim but she gave the globe a deft spin that brightened

it again. She motioned to a wide pallet woven of resilient fiber, and he lay down at once. There were no coverings, no need for them in the soothingly warm water.

Despite his tiredness Barry's nerves were still tense and twitching, and he kept hearing soft sounds as the girl moved about the room. After several minutes he opened his eyes again.

Xintel had removed her brief skirt and was wearing only her silvery necklace. She was anointing herself with an oily salve that sent a pleasantly pungent odor through the water, giving special attention to her wrists and ankles where the cords of the norus had chafed them and to the livid bruises that were developing on other portions of her slender body. She paused and smiled at him, not at all embarrassed.

Finally she came toward the pallet and without hesitation lay down beside him. She stretched and moved slightly until she found a comfortable position, and then her breathing took on the slow regularity of sleep while the light dimmed.

For a while Barry remained awake. Half-formed questions spun madly through his mind but when he tried to think rationally his tired brain balked.

HE WOKE and sat up, floated up from the pallet in the unaccustomed support of the black water, settled back slowly while he strove to winnow true memories from the remnants of nightmare. The girl woke and spoke questioningly. It required great concentration on Barry's part to understand and answer, for he had forgotten much of what he had learned from those Mexican laborers.

"Yes, I feel better," he said hesitantly. "But—"

In the blackness their bodies touched accidentally. Her skin was warm and smooth, soft but with the firmness of underlying muscle. After a long moment she drew away.

Barry blinked as she spun the light into brilliance. Her dressing was a simple and brief process, and then she turned to him with an intent look on her face.

"You come here from the Above." It was more statement than question.

Barry nodded.

"But from what yort? And how did your people change to live in the Above?"

"I come from Earth."

"Earth?" she repeated with a puzzled frown. "There is no yort beneath the seas called Earth."

Trying to explain was like describing color to a man born blind. With the surface of Venus she seemed to have a slight familiarity, but she had never glimpsed planets or stars, never seen the sun.

"You are from the World Beyond—and yet you are alive!" she said in awe.

She smiled and seemed relieved when Barry hastily assured her there was nothing supernatural about his place of origin, but she understood only that he was not an undersea dweller by birth. She hurried on to other questions.

"But why have only you of all your people come to the Here?" she asked. "And how—Oh, tell me how!—did you cause the Place Of Change to work again?"

Barry frowned, trying to grasp her meaning. "An accident happened to me out in space that made me different."

"You did not come through the Place Of Change?" She seemed bitterly disappointed. "Then how will you return?"

"I will never see my own people again, I fear," he admitted.

Xintel made a soft sound of sympathy.

"I owe my very life to you, for I would have killed myself rather than bear a child to those norus who captured me. You can stay here in Tana, with me—if Komso does not cause your death."

Barry knew that if he were to survive he must learn the ways of this undersea world. Alone he would soon perish. He had no choice.

"Who is Komso?" he asked.

Xintel spat a few sibilant words that were evident obscenities.

"He is Leader of the Chosen Ones, and he fears you. If the people learn you come from the Above they will grow dissatisfied, for there are some who still remember the ancient promises that we may return."

Barry was silent and thoughtful, considering the implications of the things Xintel had said. The girl watched the Earthman with a calculating look.

"You will help me?" she asked at length.

"Help you?"

"Perhaps together we can succeed where my father failed. Perhaps together we can overthrow Komso and break the hold of the Chosen upon Tana."

Barry thought of the open sea and the savage norus he had battled, and he had gathered the impression that Komso was some sort of priest or witchdoctor who would be an adversary without mercy. All he wanted was peace. But peace, Komso's face had told him, was something he could not have.

"Yes," he said flatly. He had no choice.

The girl laid her hand on his arm, confident and suddenly affectionate.

"Good," she said. "There is nothing we can do now. We must wait for the right time."

THERE was no night in Tana and the inhabitants slept whenever so inclined, without set intervals. After several sleeping periods Barry lost all sense of time.

Whenever the girl was not attending to the routine tasks of daily life he bombarded her with questions. She asked in turn about Earth and the colony, and at some of his answers stared and giggled as though suspecting him of concocting fantastic lies for her benefit.

At her suggestion he did not wander alone, although most of the Venusians regarded him with suspicious curiosity rather than hostility.

"Trust no one," she warned him. "For the Chosen have spies everywhere. Komso may know or suspect that you come from the Above but the less he knows about you the better."

A small cave branched off from one wall of the great cavern. No houses were placed near its black mouth and the common Venusians gave it a wide berth.

"That is the Temple of the Chosen," Xintel explained. "To approach it means death."

Just outside the forbidden zone several huge baskets had been anchored to receive offerings from each inhabitant. Food, tools, clothing, a fourth of everything produced went to the Chosen and their master.

"What would happen if the people refused to pay tribute?" Barry asked.

"The Chosen have many ways of enforcing their will," the girl replied ominously. "And no scruples."

The thirty Chosen Ones ruled the thousand or so inhabitants of Tana ruthlessly and arrogantly, a government of impulse and whim without fixed laws. The rulers were immune from all work, taking whatever they desired, subject only to Komso's word.

The situation had apparently existed so long it had been accepted as the only possible mode of life, and the submissiveness of the people was shocking to the Earthman. One day he saw a Chosen One approach one of the younger women and curtly order her to follow him. The woman shrank back, but at a black glare choked off her sobbing and moved docilely away. Her mate, standing nearby, made not the slightest move to interfere.

"He will get her back when the Chosen One tires of her," Xintel told Barry later, her normally soft voice harsh with bitterness. "That is, if the poor creature lives, for the Chosen are often brutal to the women they take. If her mate had so much as opened his mouth he would have incurred the wrath of the Gods Of The Deepes as enforced by the Chosen."

Occasionally Barry found himself wishing for a cigarette. That gave him a wry laugh, but it also impressed upon him the fact that the Venusians had created an underwater civilization without the knowledge of fire. An unintelligent race could never have managed, and he wondered to what stage they might have progressed without the yoke of the Chosen about their necks.

Metal was known in Tana only in the form of a few ornaments of greatest antiquity, about the origin of which it was forbidden by superstition and tradition even to speculate. Almost all were in the hands of the Chosen.

Xintel was one of the few exceptions, and upon examining her treasured silver necklace Barry discovered that each beautifully wrought link had been welded. Welded. That implied heat, which definitely did not fit in a subaqueous environment.

He questioned her but she only shook her head. She had no idea of the technique.

"It came through my family from the other life before the Place Of Change," was her only explanation.

The most common substance for tools and weapons was something with the cellular structure of wood but the weight and feel of cast metal. It was slightly malleable and could be sharpened by grinding against abrasive rocks, but it fractured when stressed beyond its elastic limit. It fascinated Barry, not only because of its unfamiliarity but because the Venusians had no tools suitable for working such a hard material.

But Xintel explained. The soft wood of undersea trees was carved to the required shape, and then the implements were taken to the Outside, across the sea bottom to the Cleft Of Hardening. There the wood underwent a change.

She had been returning from the Cleft—the Venusians always managed to visit the Outside in groups despite the Chosen—when Barry saved her from marauding norus.

The norus were outcast savages, hated and feared and despised. They had long since learned the folly of attacking Tana, but whenever possible would ambush anyone venturing into the Outside.

Males they invariably killed for their clothing and weapons, but females the savages preferred to capture alive. The mortality among their own women was frightfully high, particularly during pregnancy and childbirth when they were unable to defend themselves against the monstrous torvaks that scouraged the deeps, so replacement slave-wives were in constant demand.

Tana was not the only undersea city or yort, Barry learned, but the journey across the sea bottom was so perilous that communication was most infrequent and warfare impractical.

V

KOMSO had not forgotten Barry. Everywhere Barry and Xintel went a Chosen One followed, and even though their actions were not interfered with in any way it was nerve-racking to know their every move was being reported. Under such continuing surveillance his temper grew ragged.

But he heeded Xintel's repeated warnings

and the watchers learned little. Finally the Leader grew annoyed and decided this outsider, this potential threat to his unchallenged supremacy, had existed long enough. And so had the girl who sheltered him.

Barry was helping Xintel in the fields beyond the house, harvesting thick, meaty leaves that were a staple article of diet. A score of Venusians were engaged in the same task nearby.

Something prompted Barry to look up just in time to see Komso and a large Chosen One called Czerki hanging in the water some distance away. They looked aside a bit too ostentatiously as they noticed the Earthman's eyes upon them.

A frown crossed Xintel's face as he nudged her.

"We avoid trouble if we can," she whispered.

But Czerki swam unhurriedly toward them and caught Xintel by the shoulder. The girl winced as the Chosen One swung her around.

"Give me that necklace," Czerki ordered.

Xintel's face was pale as he fumbled for the catch of the ornament but her arms remained limp at her sides. Raising a hand against a Chosen One was sacrilege punishable by death—and she had guessed what Komso intended.

Barry took a step forward.

"Get your hands off!" His voice was deceptively soft.

Czerki turned with a challenging sneer. "You oppose the will of the Chosen?"

"Barry! Don't!" Xintel cried. "He has killed many."

But the sight of the Chosen One touching her slender body was more than Barry could bear. He took another step forward, his fists clenching.

Czerki whipped out a long wood-metal knife and smiled "Suitable?"

Duel. Xintel had told Barry of their custom.

In a move too perfectly timed for coincidence, someone thrust a duplicate knife toward Barry, hilt first. In that instant the Earthman knew he had walked into a framed-up battle against an expert, and with the expert's chosen weapons, just as Komso had planned it.

He must smash that plan. Still empty-handed he braced his feet against the bottom and dived. The Chosen One's knife made one startled lunge and then Barry's hand caught Czerki's wrist. For a second Earthman and Venusian glowered face to face, the Venusian's expression of surprise changing to pain as Barry's Earth-trained muscles tightened.

Barry clutched, digging his fingers into the tendon of Czerki's wrist. Czerki's face contorted. His free hand clawed out, but Barry caught the Chosen One's middle finger and forced it back.

Joints strained and the Venusian whimpered under his breath as Barry increased the crippling pressure. The knife dropped from Czerki's numbed fingers, and then with a twist Barry brought him helpless to his knees.

The faces of the watching Venusians seemed to consist almost entirely of gaping mouths and staring eyes. Barry considered the situation. Perhaps he could do more against Komso and his Chosen by discrediting and releasing this one than by killing him.

"Enough?" he gritted.

The Venusian nodded.

"Next time you bother Xintel you die," Barry warned.

Czerki got to his feet.

"Look out!" Xintel screamed, just as the Chosen One's hand flashed to his belt.

Barry leapt. His right hand, straight-arming, jolted the Venusian's head back, and at the same instant his left whipped a deadly palm-edge judo chop to Czerki's neck.

There was a sound like the breaking of a dry twig. Czerki's body jerked once and the dart of his tube-weapon plowed into the bottom.

With a gesture of revulsion the Earthman dropped the limp body and stepped back.

He looked about for Komso, angry enough now to force an immediate show-down, but the priest had prudently withdrawn.

Xintel took his arm and smiled proudly for all to see.

"Come, Barry," she said. "It is over for now."

The uneasy stares of her people followed

them, and only the long-standing superstitious fear of appearing to criticise the Chosen kept them from breaking into excited comment.

The stranger had not only defied a Chosen One but had killed in the manner of a Leader, with the touch of an empty hand. All knew now he did not come from another yort. And his companion was Xintel!

As soon as they were alone Barry turned to the girl.

"What now?" he demanded.

"Next time Komso will not underestimate you."

"What do you think he'll try?"

Xintel frowned. "Not force. One of the secret methods which have kept the Chosen in power. Perhaps the Curse with which he killed my father."

"Your father?" Barry asked. She had never spoken of her family before.

The subject was obviously painful, but she forced herself to talk.

HER father, Soren, had been an unusual individual from a family of chronic dissidents, a doubter who despite the long indoctrination of the Chosen still possessed the power to think independently. And in his family there had been passed by word of mouth across the generations all the ancient traditions of the other life which the Chosen had nearly succeeded in consigning to the limbo of forgotten knowledge.

He had the courage to venture into the Outside alone, even into the dread Above for short periods, to see for himself the things the Chosen wished forgotten.

He had actually dared to organize groups for cooperative action and to circulate whispers that the Gods Of The Deepes were a fraud perpetrated by the Chosen for their own purposes. He had aroused doubt and become the rallying point for all the latent forces of resistance.

For a brief but exciting time his efforts to undermine the priesthood had been successful. But then the old priest of the Chosen had died suddenly and Komso had succeeded to the post. Where the old priest had been senile and vacillating, Komso took forceful action.

He had publicly named Soren a

blasphemer against the Gods Of The Deep and had called down their Curse upon him.

A few sleeps later Soren had started with others toward the Cleft Of Hardening. They had scarcely left the tunnel when dozens of torvaks descended upon the group.

The others had escaped easily, the monsters paying no attention to them. All had converged upon Soren and he died quickly.

Komso had regained unquestioned power. His curse had been fulfilled in too dreadful a fashion for any to dispute his word.

Barry developed an unwillingness to spend the remainder of his life hiding behind Xintel's skirt. With increasing boldness, but conscious always of the menace of the Chosen, he began to leave the house and observe the Venusian way of life.

The undersea people bore him no grudge for killing Czerki, he discovered. In fact the Chosen One's death was not mourned even by his three women. But neither were the Venusians openly friendly toward this strange outlander who spoke haltingly and killed without weapons. They regarded him with mingled suspicion and awe.

Xintel's position in the community, he soon decided, was extremely odd.

Marriage relationships in Tana were informal, continuing only as long as mutually satisfactory. Polygamy was an accepted institution. It was customary for the girls of Tana to enter marriage relationships, on a temporary basis at least, almost as soon as they developed the curves of maturity.

Xintel was as beautiful as any female of Tana, and in addition she owned a house and tools and weapons representing considerable wealth. Nevertheless she was the only grown woman who did not have a mate or ex-mate or who was not a widow.

One day he asked her outright about it, and she burst into tears.

For a minute Barry stared, nonplussed. He put one arm around her bare shoulders.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said gently.

She snuggled closer in the curve of his arm.

"Don't talk about it if you don't want to," Barry urged.

She raised her head. "But you must know.

"When Komso put his Curse upon my father he could easily have killed me too. I was but a small girl then, and my mother already dead. But he had brought about the death of my father to display his power, and he wanted the people to remember. I was to be a living reminder.

"But, he told the people, I shared my father's guilt of blasphemy by being of his blood. Anyone mating with me would be contaminated, and upon him too would fall the curse of the Gods Of The Deep.

"The men of Tana are not cowards despite what the Chosen have done to them. Some have faced and fought even the torvaks of the Outside. But to act contrary to what Komso has declared the will of the Gods—that they will not do. So although several have looked upon me with desire, none have dared take me as mate."

There was pity in Barry's heart as he thought of the deep loneliness to which Komso had condemned her from childhood on. More than pity, he thought now. What had started with him as a matter of survival had changed and deepened, become more than friendship.

"But I am not a man of Tana," he blurted impulsively. "And I love you."

Xintel lowered her eyes. "Barry, do you really like me—that way?"

"Yes."

"Then it is settled," she declared, and came into his arms. "See, it is simple."

Later, still holding her closely, he told her, "Xintel dearest, whatever lies ahead we shall face together."

BUT even his newfound happiness could not curb Barry's restless tension. Large as it was, the cavern of Tana was still confining to one accustomed to the open sweeps of Earth, and the threat of Komso hung like a looming storm cloud. And, despite much thinking and long, fruitless conversations, neither Barry nor Xintel could see a way to attack the Chosen's almost invulnerable position.

Roaming the great cave, Barry's attention turned one day to the gas filling the upper portion. It gathered from the tiny bubbles given off by the submarine plants, with even the living houses of Tana contributing, and its level was nearly constant. Whenever its

volume increased beyond a certain point the excess spilled into the tunnel leading to the open sea.

"What's up there?" he asked.

Xintel laughed. "It should do no harm to go there."

Together they swam high above the town along one insloping wall of the cavern, passing through the thin layer where swarming microscopic life furnished Tana's constant illumination, and reached the surface.

"Clear the water from your lungs all at once," Xintel instructed him. "It's easier that way."

She exhaled as far as possible, water pouring from her open mouth, and gasped in a breath of gas. He did likewise, and after some choking and coughing, found he could breathe.

They climbed out on a slanting rock outcropping and he stared around.

"This gas must be almost pure oxygen," he said, his voice ringing hollowly.

He looked around at the vaulted roof and irregular walls, noticing that his breathing, while not painful, was somewhat labored. Then suddenly the girl laughed wildly and did a few steps of a strange sinuous dance.

"What's the matter?" he asked anxiously.

She threw herself into his arms with limp abandon and squinted up into his face as though having difficulty focusing her eyes. He believed he understood, and besides he was beginning to cough.

She was giggling as he pushed her head under the water, but he had to force himself to overcome his instinctive Earth reactions before he could take that first breath of liquid.

After a few minutes Xintel gave him a shamefaced smile.

"Did I make a fool of myself?" she asked.

"Of course not," he replied gallantly but with a trace of absentmindedness.

Slowly they let themselves drift down into the city, with Barry's mind working furiously. He had remained out of water several minutes. He thought of the colony, and—until Xintel touched his arm—of Dorothy.

The experience gave a new purpose to his oddly timeless life. After that during each waking period he swam up to the cavern roof. Each time, as well as he could

judge, he was able to remain out of water a little longer.

At first Xintel scolded him bitterly, as from time immemorial wives have scolded husbands for their own good. Upon the Venusians breathing gaseous oxygen had the same effects as alcohol addiction on Earth. She told him horrible stories of people who had drunkenly wandered into the Outside and fallen afoul of norus or torvaks. She pointed out an oxygen addict who moved jerkily and seemed half insane. Once she even resorted to the ancient feminine weapon of contending amid loud sobs that he no longer loved her or he would instantly cease his debauchery.

But Barry persisted, and after following him and seeing for herself that he did not become intoxicated she finally accepted his habit, along with his periods of silent thoughtfulness, as an inborn peculiarity of her alien mate.

VI

GRADUALLY, so gradually he could not determine when it started, he began to hear a new word whispered around the city.

"Demon!"

"The demons are not all dead!"

"The demons have returned!"

"The demons gather to attack us!"

"Only Komso can save us from the demons!"

"Is he—?"

"Perhaps her father, Soren Who Died Accursed, was a—"

"Have they found—?"

"Will the demons—?"

A shuddering uneasiness spread insidiously among the people, and their attitude changed. Venusian men watched the Earthman with hostile speculation in their eyes and hands close to weapon hilts. Women moved aside as he approached, dragging their children with them.

Although not a single individual mentioned demons to Barry's face he knew he was somehow concerned.

"Just what are these demons?" he demanded of Xintel.

He expected her to refer to some superstition, but she surprised him with a definite answer.

"They were the last of my race to live in the Above—not devil-spirits or supernatural beings at all. But they were outlaws and killers, and so were not permitted to pass through the Place Of Change. Over this there was great bitterness, and the Last Days were filled with hatred and slaughter that is still remembered. But they are all long since dead."

"You mean your people came here from the Above deliberately?" Barry asked incredulously. "Why?"

Xintel nodded. "We—my forefathers—were to have come to the Here for a short time only, for sanctuary. But our way back was closed when the Place Of Change was destroyed. And the Chosen, gaining power, saw that misfortune overtook those who knew the secret of the Place."

She smiled tremulously. "I hoped that you could lead us back. But you too had lost the way of return."

"But why? What made your people come to the Here?"

The pain of ancient tragedy was in Xintel's eyes as she told the story.

"Around us nearly everywhere are creatures, living creatures, small beyond all normal sight," she explained.

"There." She pointed to the light. "And another sort live in the paste which produces gas. My people were always clever at making use of them."

"In the Above live many more types of these unseen creatures. My people became too clever—but they were not as clever as they thought."

She glanced at Barry and spoke with earnest seriousness. "Some of them, incredibly tiny as they are, are deadly. They get inside a person, causing him to sicken and die, killing as surely as a spear-thrust."

She hesitated as though expecting the Earthman to hoot in derision at such an idea, and continued only when he nodded slowly.

"There were quarrels among factions of my people, breaking out again and again with increasingly vicious fury."

"Ordinary weapons were not enough. With their skill my people took the unseen things—they understood, then, a way to see them—and made them change their natures to become more deadly still."

Barry shuddered as he guessed the rest. He remembered talk on Earth of developing mutant, hypervirulent strains for bacterial warfare.

"The ancients used the special unseen creatures they had created to fight their battles, and the slaughter was horrible beyond belief. But then the creatures turned against their masters. The other tiny creatures with which the ancient protected themselves failed, became ineffective, and Death walked the entire Above unhindered."

It hadn't happened on Earth yet but Barry could picture bacterial warfare out of control, spontaneous mutations loose, and no vaccines or antitoxins to combat them. The warm, eternally moist atmosphere of Venus offered ideal conditions. Perhaps that was why the Colony had found only insects and quasi-reptiles. Infection could have spread from homo Venusians to all related, warm-blooded life forms, blasting them into extinction.

"Against that deadly smallness there was no way to fight," Xintel continued. "And there was but one place to flee. So the Place Of Change was built by the wisest of my race. But by the time it was completed only a few remained to use it."

BARRY had no doubts who was fomenting talk of the demons, Komso.

But if the Venusians had once been air-breathers and had deliberately become water-breathers there was still a chance that somehow he could become completely human again. At least his condition was not completely hopeless.

He could escape. His practice sessions had taught him to remain out of water nearly three hours, as nearly as he could judge, and that should be sufficient to re-establish contact with the Colony. But escaping alone, leaving Xintel behind, was something he knew he could never do.

"How did the Place Of Change work?" he asked. "On what principles? Did your Ancients actually understand how to generate Sigma radiations on the surface of a planet? Or was the change accomplished in other ways?"

Xintel shook her head. "That knowledge has fallen into the hands of the Chosen and been destroyed. Knowledge, except for

themselves, is according to the Chosen against the will of the Gods."

"Is there nothing left?" Barry insisted, grasping at straws.

"The Place still remains amid the ruins of Last City," Xintel answered unexpectedly. "But it is wrecked and useless."

"How do you know?"

Xintel smiled sadly. "I have been there, twice. Soren once took me as a little girl, and once I went alone."

"But how?"

"Long since have the creatures of deadly smallness exterminated each other. Soren knew, and I know, and Komso knows. But Komso will not tell the people that one can go to the Above for a short time and not die."

Immediately Barry wanted to see for himself the remains of Last City and particularly the Place Of Change, but the Venusian girl demurred. The trip was perilous, she said, and if they were to leave Tana now, going into the Outside and toward the Above, it would only confirm in the minds of the people that Barry was a demon. Anything that would precipitate open action before they were able to take countermeasures against Komso's plots would be a fatal mistake.

Reluctantly Barry put the idea aside, but he did not abandon it. Instead he doubled his practice sessions in the oxygen at the top of the cavern, driving himself until his chest burned and throbbed. He was still a member of the Five Ship Plan whose duty was to the colony, and besides he had a frightening surety that without outside help Komso would eventually encompass his death.

ONE day when they were returning from the fields in the far reaches of the cavern they saw a man swimming away from their house. Barry put on an angry burst of speed, but the distance was great and the furtive figure vanished.

Xintel went through the three rooms inch by inch, checking all her possessions—but nothing was missing and nothing seemed to have been disturbed.

"We must have frightened him away before he could steal anything," Barry commented.

The girl frowned and bit her lip. "No. I do not think thievery was his object."

"What then?"

"I—I do not know," she admitted uneasily.

Komso finally took official cognizance of the talk of demons. He selected ten young men, not of the Chosen, and led them forth to reconnoiter in the Above. The men went heavily armed, but still superstitious dread would have prevented them from venturing to the myth-haunted surface without the high priest's mystic protection.

Barry grew acutely uneasy when he heard of the expedition. It boded no good for anyone except Komso. Hour after hour the underwater city hummed with speculation. For Barry and Xintel it was a nerve-racking wait.

Then Komo returned—and with him came only three of the ten.

With lightning rapidity the story spread. There were demons in the Above, and despite Komso's great powers they had turned overwhelmingly potent weapons against them.

The mates of the slain were loud in their lamentations, and as though following prepared instructions, the Chosen spread the rumor that Barry, and Xintel too, were responsible for the slaughter. Barry was a demon spy, and Xintel had turned against her own people to mate with him.

Barry felt certain the priest had deliberately led his men into disaster for the psychological effect. He had been building hatred, and to one of Komso's mentality, seven deaths would be a negligible price for this crowning touch.

Drawn together by a spreading terror the people massed near the center of the city, each seeking company to stem their rising panic of helplessness. Their mutterings increased, their mood grew uglier.

But with dramatic suddenness Komso appeared in the doorway of his cave-temple and swam slowly forward. The murmuring died, then broke out again with a questioning undertone. The priest raised his arms so the sacred bracelets of office on his thick wrists flashed in the cold yellow light. Then slowly, deliberately he began to speak.

He expressed regret for the deaths of those who had followed him aloft. He had

underestimated the malignancy of the demons, he admitted.

A shocked silence fell over the crowd, broken only by the grief stricken sobs of one of the widows. He glared at the woman, and his eyes made her cower.

The peril was dire, he warned. One demon had already penetrated the sacred boundaries of Tana and others were gathering in the Above. Soon they would descend and overwhelm the city unless the people of Tana followed his leadership unquestioningly.

But the mission had not been in vain. Komso had discovered the demons' plans—and their vulnerability.

"We killed one demon!" he boasted.

Barry gasped. Komso was too clever to tell an outright lie when there were three surviving witnesses to check his story.

"Kill the demons! Kill all the demons!"

A Chosen One began the chant, and it was taken up and echoed by the crowd.

It sounded so absurd that a group of aquatic semi-savages could hope to attack a surface settlement defended by the finest weapons of Earth that Barry almost laughed. But he remembered Xintel's account of the Venusian downfall, and was not so sure. Komso's forces would not have to breach the defense perimeter of the colony to achieve their objective. Bacterial warfare ineffective under water, could render the surface uninhabitable again.

And the colony had no inkling of such a threat.

"Damn him," Barry thought. It was all so stupid and useless.

He fumed while Komso's words calmed, influenced, and finally controlled with hypnotic completeness the emotions of his listeners.

"The demons shall die!" Kosmo orated. "I, Komso, shall call upon the powers of the Gods Of The Deep. Beasts of the marshlands shall come at my command, smashing and overturning the houses and forts of the demons in the Above! And then shall the Unseen Death smite them!"

The people roared their approval, and while they were still shouting the priest turned away in abrupt dismissal.

Barry and Xintel looked at each other, their faces white and set, each wondering

what they could do.

A hundred thoughts flashed through Barry's mind at once, dominated by the knowledge it was his duty to warn the colony. He had become a freak through accident, but he was still an Earthman. But to make his warning really valuable he must know more of Komso's methods. He thought momentarily of invading the cave-temple to steal information or even assassinate the priest, but discarded the notion. Komso would be expecting such an attempt and have his Chosen Ones waiting.

THEY were still discussing the situation hours later when Xintel suddenly raised her hand for silence. A puzzled frown appeared on her face and she dropped to the lower room. Barry, watching her peer around the door curtain, saw her body grow tense. He listened, and his ears caught a confused sound of voices.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Men are coming this way, and they are led by Sanlan, the brother of that Czerki."

"Komso's work?"

"Naturally."

Barry reached for a spear. "They won't touch you as long as I'm alive," he promised.

The sounds outside grew louder.

Go in through the door," he heard a voice command. "Chase the demon and his woman upward and out. Lart and I will attend to them."

Xintel leaped to the upper room and began tossing down baskets.

"Block the hatchway," she directed. "We will hold the middle room."

Quickly Barry piled them across the opening, thrusting extra spears through the wovenwork and into the material of the floor. It was a flimsy barricade but better than nothing.

Xintel loaded her crossbow. Barry stood beside her with a spear ready.

"Now!" the voice outside boomed.

Men poured into the lower room, shouting to keep up their courage. Xintel, her face pale, squinted along her crossbow and thumbed the trigger. A man screamed. A spear thwacked upward into the baskets as the girl put her strength against her weapon's reloading ratchet.

"Can you hold them off a minute?" Barry whispered.

She nodded, and he leaped to the upper room. One basket remained, and he found that by standing on it his head was just below the roof's lower surface. With his knife he began cutting into the matted fibers of the roof. He was nearly through when a whisper from above made him pause.

"Psst! Lart, be very sure your thrust misses."

That was Sanlan, Barry guessed.

The other Venusian growled under his breath.

"Komso will have your skin if you disobey," Sanlan warned.

"But why?"

Sanlan chuckled. "Have you no faith?"

Barry resumed cutting, puzzled and suspicious, opening a hole just large enough to admit his head. He had guessed his position well, for Sanlan and Lart were standing with their backs toward him while they watched the hatchway.

The Earthman withdrew silently, taking no chances that Sanlan's talk had been a trick to draw him out.

Xintel glanced up as he dropped to the middle room. A confused discussion was in progress below, for no man wanted to be the first to rush the barricade.

"Give me both your tube-weapons," Barry demanded.

She turned her hips, allowing him to take them from her belt without putting down her crossbow or relaxing her vigilance.

"Come at once when you hear me call," he directed. "We can't hold out forever. It's run or die."

"Run? Where?"

"Outside. It is our only chance."

He leaped to the upper room again.

A tube gun in each hand, he thrust his wrists through the hole he had cut, Sanlan and Lart were still waiting.

"Perhaps you should have others break through the walls," Lart suggested impatiently.

Sanlan shook his head. "There is plenty of time."

But Sanlan's own time ran out just then as Barry triggered the weapon in his left hand. He died instantly.

Lart whirled. Barry fired the other tube. Lart screamed and doubled over in agony.

"Xintel!" Barry called.

She came up with a rush.

Lart was still alive, and he screamed as they emerged onto the roof. Answering yells came from below.

"Let's go!" Barry barked as attackers began to swarm out of the house.

They swam desperately, side by side. The members of the mob trailed after them, but although they split the water with blood-thirsty yells they were reluctant in their efforts to close with the fugitives. Xintel had taught them respect during the battle inside the house, and Barry was a dread demon.

Barry broke his stroke to point. A large crowd had gathered around the mouth of the tunnel.

"Women there too," Xintel panted.

As they drew nearer he could see she was right. Women and unarmed men predominated in the group around the portal. They made no hostile moves, but nevertheless Barry drew his knife.

And then, off to one side, he saw the unmistakable figure of the priest.

Komso watched their headlong flight with a thin smirk of satisfaction, and as they drew near he pointed one arm at them in a ritualistic gesture and began a resonant chant. A deadly hush fell over the watchers.

"Accursed be ye!" Komso intoned. "Manifestations of evil who presume to flaunt those the Gods have appointed to rule, be ye accursed by the Gods Of The Deeps!"

"Gods Of The Deeps, heed thy servant! Send thou thy creatures that they may feed, that they may rend the flesh and grind the bones and destroy utterly those whom I have cursed in thy mighty names!"

BARRY felt a crawling prickle of fear along his spine at the confidence of Komso's manner. Xintel's face twisted in terror as she remembered how that self-same curse had brought death to her father. The Earthman felt an almost overwhelming urge to swerve aside, to swing in a suicidal dive upon the priest and his Chosen guards. But remembrance of his duties to the colony and to Xintel overcame blind fury.

It seemed too good to be true when he and Xintel plunged into the dark passageway without interference. The armed mob followed, shouting to the noncombatants to move aside—but they were in the clear. They emerged from the tunnel mouth into the open, deadly, faintly luminous sea of the Outside.

"Hold!" They heard Komso's shouted command behind them. "Follow and you too shall be accursed!"

He did not have to repeat his order, for the Venusians were never too eager to venture into the Outside. Instead they massed at the portal to witness the fate of the demon and his traitorous mistress.

Suddenly the girl gasped in horror, clutching Barry's arm and pointing upward and outward. Against the background of dim luminosity, far in the distance, two bright pinpoints showed. Then three. Four. And then more than he could count.

"Torvaks!" she gasped.

Barry stared aghast. As though summoned by Komso's words the terrible undersea monsters were gathering from all directions.

Xintel's forehead wrinkled in desperate concentration.

"The Cleft!" she said suddenly.

Barry followed blindly as she dove toward the rocky, irregular bottom. Each time he risked a glance over his shoulder the monsters were nearer. And there were more of them. His muscles ached, but those trails of ominous light acted as a powerful stimulant.

The girl led him along the bottom, paying no attention to landmarks but relying solely on an intuitive sense of direction which all Venusians possessed. Soon Tana was lost to sight.

How long the nightmare chase lasted Barry was never to know. Seconds grew to ages and minutes to throbbing eternities. He concentrated on swimming, swimming, swimming for his very life, and hardly heard Xintel's words of encouragement.

"Just—a—little—further!"

Then stabbing, biting, burning pain seared his throat. Almost intolerable. But Xintel was guiding him straight down into a narrow fissure in the bottom. Her legs stopped their flutter-kick and she allowed momentum to carry her bottomward. Barry

too ceased his exertions in a state of near collapse.

"Perhaps—they—won't follow!" Xintel panted.

Both looked upward. The monstrous shapes—they could see the gross, hideous bodies now—seemed unwilling to follow their prey into the crevice. They wheeled above in relentless circles.

One creature, like a gigantic moray with finned pectoral legs, made an abortive lunge but turned upward again a few feet above them.

Another torvak's neck shot out, its armored head striking the eel-creature a tremendous blow. Another monster swooped, fangs ripping, and for a few minutes the water grew murky with spilled blood and roiled ooze as the three huge beasts battled. The fight ended, and once more the saurians took up a restless, watchful patrol above the cowering pair.

Barry's breathing eased but the burning in his throat remained. Something in the water was irritating the tender membranes of his lungs, nose and eyes. He glanced at Xintel and saw that she too was in pain. But it was this very irritant that was preserving their lives. The monsters did not like its smell or taste.

"Maybe they'll go away," he said, not believing his own words but trying to reassure the girl.

The cleft in the ocean floor was long and narrow, deeper than it was wide, and at the bottom it tapered to a hair-thin crevice in the bedrock. The steeply slanting walls were deeply covered with a yellow-blue greasy jelly mixed with mud and silt. Barry recognized it from Xintel's descriptions as the Cleft Of Hardening where soft wooden implements were made useable. The crack in the bottom must extend deep into the heart of the planet.

"Xintel," he asked. "Are there any weapons buried here now?"

"There always are," she answered, but her voice was filled with despair.

"Where?"

She did not know. When the inhabitants of Tana buried objects to be hardened they were extremely careful to smooth the jelly over them. Otherwise prowling norus would dig them up.

Pawing into the sticky, corrosive jelly with hands and arms they began a blind search. Within minutes the girl gave a cry as she uncovered a spear. She wiped away the clinging stuff, then wept with disappointment. It had been buried only a short time and still had the soft consistency of balsa. Angrily she threw it down.

Barry recovered it. As a weapon it was worthless, but it was firm enough to use as a prod. Methodically he moved along the bottom, thrusting deeply every few inches.

"Got something!" he called, and Xintel swam to his side.

THERE were two spears and two long knives, all thoroughly hardened. Within a few more sleeps someone from Tana would have made the dangerous trip to pick them up.

Barry glanced at the shadows overhead. It felt good to have a weapon in his hand again, even though logic told him a spear could never penetrate the armored hides of those nightmare creatures. They could do absolutely nothing but wait and hope.

He found a projecting rock that was relatively free from slime and settled down. He wanted to think.

A sudden commotion overhead made him leap up. Two bodies came hurtling over the edge of the cleft some two hundred yards away, with trails of light glistening behind them. A torvak lashed out, missed, and its frustrated bellow made the water vibrate as the newcomers settled toward the bottom.

"Norus!" Xintel hissed in Barry's ear.

"They're not armed," Barry observed.

She turned on him peevishly. "But they're norus!"

Barry, not trained to hatred by a lifetime of strife with these outcasts, felt sorry for them as they crouched trembling and gasping from their flight. They eyed him furtively.

After the first few minutes, when it became evident the norus did not intend to break the unspoken truce imposed by mutual peril, the girl relaxed. Yet she did not turn her back to them.

For a long while she and Barry sat in silence. There was nothing to say, nothing worth saying in their hopeless situation. The norus watched stolidly, their eyes flicking

occasionally between the pair from Tana and the monsters circling overhead.

Then in a quick move that startled Barry the girl stood up, unfastened her skirt, stepped out of the garment. She seemed entirely unaware of her nakedness.

"Fan your hands back and forth," she requested. "Make light."

Barry complied, swirling the water to brightness. The norus watched uneasily, staring hard at the girl. But Xintel was absorbed in inspecting the fabric of her skirt, going over it inch by inch. A couple of times she held it to her nose, but each time shook her head.

"Ha!" she cried suddenly, pointing to a slight, almost invisible stain.

"What is?" he asked.

"It may be—. Give me your knife."

She cut away the stained cloth and wrapped it around the unhardened, useless spear.

"What are you doing?"

She ignored his question.

"Take this and go part way up," she directed. "But be careful, very careful, dearest—and throw it over the rim."

Trusting her knowledge of this undersea world, he climbed the slippery wall. Half-way up he found a foothold. He tensed his muscles, heaved the weapon with the peculiar pushing gesture he had learned was the only way to throw under water. As the spear made a high arc he abandoned his exposed position in a headlong dive.

Xintel shouted happily. "Look! Barry! Look!"

Above the cleft the water was whipped to intense brilliance as the nightmare monsters converged on the spot where the spear had fallen.

"What is it?" Barry yelled.

Xintel laughed and threw her arms around his neck. "The curse, Barry! The curse Komso put upon us!"

"Huh?" he grunted.

"Everyone knows those beasts follow the smell of blood, and that a man wounded in the Outside is as good as dead. They follow other smells too!"

At once he understood. "So Komso's curse is some powerful lure that will bring every monster within miles to attack, but has a smell we ourselves can't detect."

She nodded. "That one we saw leaving our house—he did it."

Xintel put down her skirt and even undraped her precious metal necklace. Stark naked and unarmed she started up the slope.

"Come back!" he yelled as he sensed her intention.

She paused, but then continued upward.

A shadow swooped.

"Look out!" Barry screamed. But Xintel had been alert and had thrown herself into a plunging dive.

"Oh!" she sobbed as she pulled herself up beside him. "It's no good. It has gotten into my skin. Probably yours too."

But after his burst of renewed hope Barry refused to surrender. "This corrosive jelly might counteract it," he suggested.

Xintel's eyes were somber. "We have nothing to lose," she agreed.

They scooped out two troughs in the greasy jelly and buried themselves with only their heads projecting, but at Xintel's suggestion they took positions where they could keep an eye on the norus.

"Rub some on your face," Barry advised the girl. "In your hair too."

"It stings!" she complained.

"I know. But it's our only chance."

VIII

THEY let an hour of torment pass, and although Xintel tried gamely to keep her face composed she could not hide an occasional grimace of pain as the caustic jelly ate at the more tender portions of her skin.

The swarm of monsters still held patrol above the cleft with dull-witted reptilian patience. The two norus had settled down, squatting lumpishly, with only their eyes active.

At last Barry pulled himself from his uncomfortable bed. His body was red and chapped from head to foot. Xintel was in the same condition.

"I hope this works," he said.

He climbed toward the rim, nearly to the top, and still the beasts paid no attention. He made no sudden movements and their eyesight was apparently dull.

7—Planet—May

"Barry! That's enough! Come back!" Xintel called.

Deliberately he waved his arms. A swimming torvak turned in its own length and plunged toward him, and Barry barely evaded its rush.

"If we try to escape they'll see us," Xintel said.

Barry nodded sadly. Even though Komso's curse had been voided they could still only wait and hope.

The nomads who had found refuge with them unwittingly solved his dilemma. As once more the age-old envious hatred of the homeless ones for the city dwellers came to the fore they whispered to each other. For a moment Barry and Xintel grew inattentive. The norus had been waiting for just that. They dashed forward, intent on snatching the weapons that to them represented great wealth. Xintel shouted in alarm and one of the savages struck at her with a webbed fist.

Barry's knife flashed and a noru died. As the survivor swerved to evade Xintel's spear, Barry was upon him from behind.

His knife descended, this time not in a killing stroke. Deliberately he carved a long, shallow gash down the savage's back, a wound that would bleed copiously. Then he shouted and roared ferociously. The wounded noru fled.

Xintel streaked in pursuit, a grim expression on her face and a spear poised, but Barry reached out one arm and caught her ankle. Instinctively she twisted and her fingernails raked his face.

He slapped her hard.

"No!" he barked. "Let the noru go!"

She looked at him in furious disgust as the nomad churned in panic-stricken flight toward the rim.

"He's bleeding!" Barry snapped.

A great dark shadow swooped at the noru, missed, and Xintel looked admiringly at Barry as she understood.

The water above the cleft grew streaky with light as the monsters abandoned the tenuous remnants of the lure to follow a trail of fresh blood. The noru gibbered in horror as he dodged along the rocky bottom.

"Let's go!" Barry barked. "Straight up!"

It was a long, tiring swim. At last they floated just below the surface.

"Can you find the colony?" Barry asked.

"We go to the nearest shore, near Last City," Xintel corrected. "We are not safe here over deep water."

They swam again, this time horizontally, guided once more by Xintel's compass sense. Once Barry raised his head, but all he could see was a narrow circle of rippled water upon which the ever-present mists pressed heavily. A slight rosy glow overhead, dim and diffuse, was the only indication of the sun.

Finally the girl stopped. "We are almost to the edge of the Above," she said.

Barry put his head up again but still could see nothing but water and mist. They swam a few strokes more, and then he and the girl lowered their feet to a bottom of soft mud.

When he stood up in the neck-deep water and emptied his lungs there was an interval of wracking coughing and gasping. But then he found with elation that he was breathing without too much difficulty. His practice sessions in the cavern were paying off.

Xintel too stood up and gasped in the warm, stench-filled air, floundering beside the taller Earthman as they waded toward a dimly seen bank ahead. The water had shoaled to her waist, when without warning, she staggered and collapsed.

Barry caught her as she fell, and with Earth habits returning, cradled her in his arms with her face above water.

Xintel! What's wrong?"

She stirred in his arms and her eyes opened.

"Put me down," she requested.

Then she noticed the frightened expression on his face.

"I'll be all right soon," she assured him.

"Just—tired. And air—too suddenly."

Tenderly he laid her in the shallow water.

"Sure you're all right?" he asked solicitously.

She nodded.

For a few minutes he waited beside her, thinking of the colony. He understood now Komso's reference to the beasts of the marshlands overturning the houses of the demons, and the priest's plan of battle. His lure would attract the monsters with which the colony had already had trouble.

And when the colonists were forced outside by the hypervirulent bacteria of the Unseen, death would strike.

Without a warning the unsuspecting colony would be doomed, but without Xintel's guidance he could not reach them to give that warning.

"Barry." The Venusian girl's voice was still weak and unsteady. "The Place Of Change is on this shore. Go look at it. Perhaps you, with a different mind and a different knowledge, could—"

"You sure you'll be all right alone?"

She was sure, and finally Barry left her, emptied his lungs once again, and floundered up the muddy bank.

HIS body felt heavy without the support of the water to which it had become accustomed, but it was good to be walking like a true Earthman again. He plodded inland, cautiously forcing his way through the thick swamp vegetation. The ground underfoot was a tangle of roots, slime and jagged stones.

Last City was a disappointment. Nothing was left but a few scarcely discernible mounds almost hidden by the swamp jungle. It was impossible to tell even what sort of buildings once existed.

He was ready to turn back when a shift in the mists disclosed the Place Of Change.

It was a doomed building, huge even by the engineering standards of Earth, and something done in ancient times had prevented the jungle from encroaching upon it. Half submerged in mud, tilted where the ground beneath it had softened and shifted, the great hemispherical shell nevertheless remained intact. Barry hastened forward, found a circular opening, evidently once a window high on the structure but now at ground level, and after a glance at the dimness within stooped and entered.

He had not known what to expect—Xintel had told him only that the Place Of Change was irreparably ruined—but certainly nothing so bleak and disheartening. There was nothing but mud within the great building. Whatever machinery or equipment had been used to change the Venusians to water-breathers had vanished without a trace. Barry's shoulders sagged as he turned back toward the window.

But then the engineering training of his years on Earth reasserted itself, and he wondered of what material the building had been constructed to withstand the ravages of the savage environment of the Venus. With the flat of one hand he brushed at the greenish, clinging slime that covered the walls. Etched into the wall were strange symbols arranged in an orderly fashion. Writing, obviously done by the Ancients.

It was possible that the inscriptions included the technical data on which the Place had been based.

He ran to another section of wall and wiped at it, then at random to a third spot. More writing. It meant nothing to him, but in the colony there were specialists who might—

His chest began to burn, bringing his mind back to his present situation. There was nothing he could do for the present, and he must warn the colony. There was no telling how far Komso's plans had progressed. Perhaps the attack had already started.

He hurried out through the window, slid and stumbled through the swamp, plunged into the water. Xintel was sitting up.

"Can you find the colony?" he asked.

She nodded. "Far along the shore, that way, I can feel the presence of life. Your kind of life."

"That's it! Let's go!"

They followed the shoreline, and as the minutes passed a happy excitement grew in the Earthman at the prospect of seeing his own kind again. Xintel was silent.

When they came to the opening of the slough, Xintel pointed.

"That way. Not far."

Barry shook his head vigorously. "They'd shoot first and look later," he explained. "Particularly after Komso's first raid. I'll have to approach overland."

Half a mile beyond the slough a huge tree had fallen and was lying half in the swamp and half in the water.

"This should be far enough," he decided. "Wait here for me. And be careful."

He stuck his head out, studying the treacherous, mist-shrouded swamp he must cross, then ducked under again. The Venusian girl looked at him for an instant. Her hands moved as though to detain him.

"Good-bye Barry."

He kissed her and held her close.

"It's not good-bye," he promised. "I'll come back."

Xintel smiled tremulously.

He released her and climbed to the tree-trunk, emptied his lungs of water and slogged off into the swamp. It was filthy and difficult and dangerous traveling, but a sense of urgency was upon him.

After a while he began to sing, loudly and hoarsely and off key. He sang the popular songs of his last days on Earth, cowboy ballads, ribald and unprintable construction camp ditties. The sounds drifted thinly into the enshrouding mists.

He did not sing from happiness. The colony would be an armed camp and the songs of Earth offered his only means of identification in the fog. At the end of each verse he paused and listened.

He finished a particularly lugubrious cowboy number entitled *Blood On The Saddle*.

"Hey! Who's that out there?" A voice reached him through the mist.

"Ya-hoo!" Barry called. "Where are you?"

"Over here!" the voice replied.

"Keep yelling, and—don't—shoot!"

Barry called, spacing his words for clearness.

But sounds moved in tricky ways through the moist, opaque air and it was only after long floundering that he saw the dim shadows of men.

"Who are you?" the voice called sharply.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I'm Barry Barr."

"You lie!" someone shouted. "Barry Barr's dead!"

Barry recognized the voice.

"That's what you think, Phillips!"

He sloshed his way over to join them and they stared in amazement.

"Where you been?" one of them demanded.

"At the bottom of the sea."

"This ain't no time for kidding!" the man retorted angrily.

"I mean it," Barry declared earnestly. "But guide me in quick. There's hell brewing."

HE WAITED impatiently in the vestibule of the central building while they peeled off their rubberized swamp suits. Then he was inside, back in the colony he had never expected to see again.

"Call the council of captains and get the leading technical men of each division," he snapped. "Emergency!"

He coughed, his lungs irritated by the artificially dehumidified air of the building. Just then Dr. Jensen passed down the hallway. He saw his erstwhile patient and came running.

"What happened to you, son?" he asked.

"Water machine stopped," Barry said shortly, unwilling to be diverted from more pressing matters by past events. "Had to get out or die."

"The devil!" the doctor exclaimed. "It was running all right when I came back, but the window was smashed."

For Barry that was conclusive evidence—if such were needed—that the breakdown had been no accident. Hind had turned on the water and power again to cover his deed.

Dr. Jensen grabbed Barry's arm. "Let me make some tests on you," he asked eagerly.

"No time now," Barry snapped.

The four spaceship captains and as many technicians as could crowd into the room, set up a babble of questions as Barry entered. He glanced around quickly, searching for two faces, but neither Dorothy Voorhees nor Robson Hind was there. He held up a hand for silence.

The noise subsided.

"Gentlemen, there is intelligent life on Venus, intelligent *human* life of an origin common to our own. You tangled with them recently."

"My God!" a man exclaimed. "We thought it was some animal that killed Evans."

"I told you that was a knife wound and not the mark of teeth," another interrupted.

"We heard Fred shooting out beside the slough," someone explained. "But by the time we got there he was dead and there was nothing in sight."

"Don't underestimate these Venusians," Barry warned. "They live under water. No knowledge of fire or explosives—they lost

those when they went aquatic—but their bacteriology is advanced. They once staged a full scale bacterial war. And they knew enough biological science—a damn' sight more than we know—to deliberately become water breathers to escape the mess their war created."

He noticed sceptical looks on some of the faces.

"Just look at me," he said. "What happens by accident can be done on purpose. This colony is facing death. A fanatical group of Venusians are planning to wipe us out, and the attack will come soon. They will use a chemical that attracts every swamp beast and water monster within miles.

"It works, I know it works," he insisted, and shuddered as he remembered the torvaks.

"Then there will be hypervirulent bacteria. You know what that means!"

"Why should they attack us?" someone demanded.

"You're strange to them, alien, and there is a leader among them who fears outside influences will undermine his absolute control."

"All right! Let's get ready, shoot the works, and give them what they're asking for!" The man who spoke had been a close friend of Evans.

"No!" Barry said decisively. "That would be the worst thing possible!"

"What would you advise?" one of the captains asked.

"Many of them would be friendly if given a chance," Barry explained. "But if you plant mines in the slough and wipe out the attacking party it will mean enmity between colonists and the surviving Venusians for all time to come. Both sides will be vulnerable, you to bacterial attack, they to depth charges, and the surface of Venus will be rendered uninhabitable for years or even centuries."

"What's the alternative?" Captian Reno demanded.

The door opened and Barry glanced around. Even in mud-streaked coveralls Dorothy Voorhees was beautiful. He had forgotten just how desirable she was.

"Barry!" she cried joyfully, and ran to him.

Instinctively he responded to her kiss—until he remembered Xintel and his own condition.

"I won't be able to stay," he told her, deliberately making his voice harsh. "I'm not cured and probably never will be."

"But—but your water machine can be fixed," she protested.

"There's more than that," he said, and with an effort turned away.

IX

"AS I WAS saying, gentlemen. Using the electric secondaries from the ships, with submerged electrodes, you can set up a high-voltage, low-ampere barrier across the slough that will stun without killing. If this first attack can be warded off without killing, perhaps we can establish friendly relations."

"What makes you think they could be friendly?" a man asked suspiciously.

"Because of a girl named Xintel who would undoubtedly become their leader if Komso were killed or discredited. She saved my life, and since then we have lived together and fought side by side. She is waiting on the edge of the swamp now, an outcast from her own people because she dared help me."

Dorothy understood more from his tone than his words alone conveyed. Her face paled.

"Barry," she began, her voice strained. "You—?"

The door opened again and three men crowded into the room. One was Robson Hind. The electronics expert's face went gray as he saw his supposed victim still alive. Barry itched to get at him but for the moment too much was at stake to permit personal revenge.

"Rig the shock charges at once," he suggested. "Xintel and I will do our best to head off the attack under water."

There were objections. Some considered it too dangerous. A heated argument broke out, but at last the council of captains nodded agreement. A sublethal current was to be used, but it was to be backstopped by mortars, machine guns and flame throwers. Any creature showing its head above water was to be blasted on sight.

"I'll attend to the power supply," Hind suddenly volunteered.

Barry guessed what was really in his mind. From Hind's unbalanced, paranoid viewpoint it was essential he be removed to forestall an investigation. He turned to the spaceship captains.

"I most strongly urge that someone other than Robson Hind take charge of the work."

"Why?" Captain Reno snapped.

"My reasons are valid, believe me. I'll explain later."

"The man's crazy!" Hind spluttered.

Captain Reno looked at his fellow officers and they nodded.

"Podtiaguine, take charge of the installation," Reno commanded.

The dry air was hurting Barry's lungs; Komso might attack at any moment; and Xintel was all alone where hostile swamp met hostile sea.

"I've got to get out," he declared. "Give me a pair of liquid fire pistols."

A storekeeper hurried to get them, and as Barry buckled the holster belt around his waist he looked for Dorothy. She was gone.

"Remember," he warned. "No killing unless absolutely necessary, but watch out for tricks. If my luck holds I'll be back. I have things to settle."

He looked meaningfully at Hind, then turned abruptly and strode down the hall, his ragged trousers flapping damply, his Venusian sandals squishing at every step. The warm, stench-filled Venusian mist closed around him, revivifying him and soothing his tormented lungs as he started toward the swamp.

"Barry!" It was Dorothy.

"Barry, I want a straight answer."

"Yes?"

"Have you stopped loving me?"

His answer was unhesitating. "No, and I never will. But I have no right since I became—like this."

She made a sound between a gasp and a sob.

"But that Venusian girl?"

Barry fumbled for words. "I—I love her too. It's just that I—well—you and she belong in different worlds and I'm—I'm part of both but not fully of either."

"Oh! But you'll come back—for short periods at least?"

"If I live through what's coming," he answered soberly.

She smiled with an effort, "Be careful, Barry dear, and—good luck!"

She turned, running back toward the buildings, and he plunged into the reeking swamp, backtracking along his own trail of muddy footprints and crushed vegetation.

He emerged at the fallen tree, dived in, and with a sense of relief filled his lungs with water.

"Xintel!" he called.

"Here!" He swung around. The bank beneath the tree trunk had been hollowed out by the action of ripples on the soft mud, and she crouched there, protected on three sides.

"I was so afraid you weren't coming back!"

"I told you I'd return."

"Barry?" Her voice trembled. "Did you see—her?"

He nodded.

"And yet you came back to me!" She spoke as though she could hardly believe it.

"Listen closely," he broke in. "What do the women of Tana think of Komso's plans?"

"They know many of their men will never return."

"Do you think you could—?"

"Perhaps I could sneak back into Tana. But what good would that do?"

Barry frowned thoughtfully. "Could you persuade some of them, as many as possible, to follow the war party and overtake their men? When they see you're alive, that Komso's curse didn't work—"

Xintel shook her head. "Most have never been outside Tana in their lives. Even to save their men they would be too fearful of the sea dangers and of Komso's wrath. They would never follow me."

Barry drew one of his fire pistols and moved aside.

"Watch this," he told her. The liquid charge was self-oxidizing and should burn under water, but there was a distinct danger the gun would backfire. His nerves were screaming as he squeezed the trigger.

Scarlet fire lanced from the muzzle with

a sizzling roar that nearly broke their eardrums.

The water surged and heaved.

Xintel pressed her hands to her ears; her eyes were round with amazement.

"What was that?" she gasped.

"That was fire," Barry answered, handing her both weapons. "Now you have magic to surpass anything of Komso's. Would that help persuade the women?"

Xintel smiled grimly. "They will follow me or else—. And if Komso or a Chosen One should interfere, would it—?"

"It would. And tell the women that if your people and mine can meet as friends there will be guns like this for everyone. Norus and torvaks will hold no more terrors."

"But you?" she asked.

"I must wait at the mouth of the slough and stop Komso there."

"But—?"

"Waste no more time! Hurry!"

AFTER she was gone he swam along the shore to the slough and settled on the bottom. He waited interminably it seemed before he spotted the distant streaks of light left by Komso's men, perhaps a hundred of them in a close group.

He remained crouched, waiting until they were just beyond crossbow range. Then he stood up, waving his arms to create enough light to make his identity unmistakable. He had decided his only course lay in turning Komso's own propaganda against him.

"Stop!" he commanded.

For a moment there was confusion in the ranks, and those in front backed water.

"Come forth, Komso, and look upon me!" Barry called. "You are a trickster and a fraud, and your curses are without power!"

Komso's jaw went slack and his face grew crimson. The priest spoke softly to a Chosen One.

"Men," he declared. "Only a demon could survive the curse of the Gods Of The Deep—but even a demon can die!"

Barry almost missed seeing the Chosen One raise his crossbow, but some instinct warned him just as the weapon twanged. He sidestepped and the missile whizzed by.

It had been close. If they were to open upon him in volleys—

"Komso's curses are powerless but mine are not!" he declared loudly, concealing his nervousness. "You are forgiven this time, but the next man who raises a weapon against me will feel my wrath. He shall die screaming in slow agony!"

"Rush him! Kill him!" Komso ordered, attempting to rally his wavering ranks. But Barry's boast, and their belief that he was a demon, held them back.

Barry scanned the sea for the patch of light that would indicate Xintel approaching with the women of Tana. Nothing. Stalling was his only chance.

"Men of Tana," he began. "If you follow Komso you go to certain death. Already you have seen that his so-called curse means nothing. And now I shall tell you how—"

"Close your ears!" Komso shrieked. "Listen to this infidel and the curse of the Gods will be upon you too!"

The men trembled, torn between fear of the demon and fear of their own leader.

"Those from Above would be your friends," Barry argued. "They are not demons, but men very like yourselves."

"Liar!" Komso bellowed. "The people of Tana are the only true men!"

The warriors nodded, accepting the oft-repeated dogma as indisputable truth. Barry realized it was useless to argue. He waited, hoping something would swing the balance. Meanwhile Komso deployed his forces in a crescent across the mouth of the slough. To Barry it looked like preparation for a rush that would overwhelm him.

Each warrior, he saw, carried a large sealed wooden cylinder. They handled them gingerly. Barry guessed their purpose. They contained the hypervirulent bacterial cultures with which the colony was to be exterminated. But of course, to the Venusians themselves, they were magic.

Just when it seemed Komso's men were rallying from their fright, Barry sighted a speck of brightness far out to sea. One of the men saw it too and called the priest's attention to it. Komso's stare of puzzlement changed to fury as he made out the forms of thirty women.

Xintel darted ahead of the group, past Komso's men, and before the priest could

give an order, she had reached Barry's side.

"I had to use all the fire," she said in a low voice. "There were torvaks, and it killed them."

Barry squeezed her hand, although he wished she had saved one charge with which to impress the war party.

Komso's forces were disorganized. Several of the men had left ranks to join their frightened, panting mates and a series of shrill family quarrels were in progress despite all the priest's efforts. Men cursed their wives for leaving Tana and were in turn cursed for everything the near-hysterical females could lay tongue to.

"Hear me!" Komso bellowed. "Hear me!"

The quarreling stopped abruptly.

"I challenge the demon to single, bare-handed combat!"

Barry gulped. He had wanted for a long time to get his hands on Komso, and now the opportunity was here.

"I accept!" he said firmly.

Xintel's face was ashen; her lips were trembling.

"Barry! My father believed the Leaders used poison under their fingernails; the slightest scratch means death," she whispered.

Barry dared not back down now. He watched Komso advance.

THE priest swam upward and stopped, slight motions of arms and legs holding him there. Barry recognized it as a clever move. Komso had seen what the Earthman's muscles could do when he was able to plant his feet solidly.

"Come meet your doom, Demon!" Komso taunted.

Barry sensed the interest of the watchers. Many times they had seen Komso's powers displayed, and they were waiting for the demon to flee or die.

Suddenly Barry launched himself from the bottom in a headlong rush.

Komso dodged and his hands came out in a clawing, scratching reach. In that instant Barry knew Xintel had been right.

He knocked Komso's arm aside and whipped his fist toward the smirking face. It struck, but only a glancing blow. It left him floundering off balance. The water

around them glowed with increasing brightness as they twisted and turned.

Again and again Komso's poisoned nails reached out, but each time Barry managed to escape. He tried to maneuver the battle toward the bottom, but Komso stayed above and made short, threatening swoops. Barry was forced to move upward again or remain entirely on the defensive. He did not dare grapple.

In desperation he relaxed his guard and tried a judo chop at Komso's shoulder muscles. The priest uttered a cry of pain, but the blow had not disabled. Fingernails scraping along his neck filled him with blind panic. Luckily they failed to break the skin.

Komso drew away, dove in again, this time low, clawing at Barry's legs and keeping clear of his punishing fists.

Barry drew his legs up, and as the Venusian passed under him, pumped them down with all his strength.

One foot struck Komso's side. Barry felt something shatter beneath his heel.

Komso pulled up from his rush. He turned, unhurt, prepared to dive again. And then one hand went to his side, feeling through his clothing. His face went greenish; his jaw sagged. His eyes rolled and he screamed in utter despair. Barry was too startled to follow up his advantage.

Seconds passed, and then there was a whizzing, hissing sound moving through the water at tremendous speed. A streak of light. Barry barely glimpsed the shark-like creature that burst through the ranks of Komso's men. Straight as an arrow it came, ignoring those it knocked aside.

Komso's third scream broke in the middle, unfinished. Then there was only a spreading pink stain and a few remnants.

The dead silence that followed was broken by a yell of horror. Out to sea specks of light grew brighter by the second. Warriors and women alike milled in confusion, leaderless, and when one man started a panic-stricken dash up the slough, the others dropped their weapons and followed.

Barry hung in the water, still not comprehending, until Xintel shook him out of his stunned inaction.

"Quick, Barry!"

Her legs churned the water at top speed

and she guided him with occasional touches. Once he glanced over his shoulder, and the glow around the slough's mouth disclosed huge black shapes gathering. Torvaks!

The girl swam close to shore where the water was thick and muddy and fetid with the reek of decay. After a while she cut her speed so he could come up beside her. No Venusians were in sight.

"His own curse!" she said.

Barry understood. Komso had been carrying a vial of his secret lure. Barry's random kick had broken it, saturating the priest's clothing. The beasts of the ocean had done the rest, and now, in addition, they had the smell of fresh blood to attract them.

"I've got to get ashore at once!" Barry panted.

Trapped between the electric barrier and the monsters prowling the slough, the Venusians would be doomed. With their leader dead, and ravening death at their heels, they would have forgotten all about attacking the colony, Barry hoped.

X

ONCE more they reached the spot where the tree lay at the water's edge.

"Wait here, darling," Barry said hurriedly, and climbed out.

He lay on the tree trunk a moment, coughing the water from his lungs. When he glanced up Robson Hind was standing there. Under his arms was a submachine gun.

"You damned degenerate fish-man!" he said.

Barry could only stare helplessly as Hind's trigger finger tightened. The man looked mad.

A shot barked from the swamp and at the same instant a slender arm from the water caught Hind's ankle and jerked. The submachine gun roared an unaimed burst as he toppled backwards. His head thwacked dully against the wood, and then there was a splash as he sank.

Barry stood up trembling.

A coveralled and hooded figure emerged from the swamp, carrying a carbine from which a wisp of smoke still curled.

"Barry, did I—?" Under the smears of mud Dorothy's face was pale.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I saw him following your trail, and I guessed—"

A head broke water beside the log. Dorothy fired, but Barry knocked the muzzle skyward just in time to deflect the bullet. Then he knelt to give Xintel a hand up.

The Venusian girl cleared her lungs, rubbed one webbed hand across her eyes, then gave Dorothy a long, level stare.

"He breathes like you?" she asked.

"No."

"Good. Did she kill him or did I?"

"Is that your Venusian girl?" Dorothy interrupted. "And what are you two talking about?"

Barry switched to English. "Hell's still loose. Got to get to headquarters immediately."

He started off, looked back with a worried frown. Xintel had drawn a tube-weapon to match Dorothy's rifle. The slender, coveralled Earthgirl and the more fully curved Venusian, dressed in only a torn skirt, were eying each other like two alley cats. He could almost feel the crackle of emotion between them. He winced.

"IT'S MURDER if you don't!" Barry raged.

Captain Stanley of Ship Two was in charge of the slough sector of defense. He shook his head regretfully.

"Must have the approval of the other captains first," he said.

"Well, in God's name, get them!"

Barry strained his eyes, but the mist had settled down thickly. Only the vaguest hints of heaving, convulsive movement were discernible beneath the water. The air-masked crews of the machine guns and mortars and flame throwers set up to supplement the stun barrier were tense and jittery as they waited.

The radio handpiece crackled with static that drowned all communication, so Captain Stanley sent a runner to summon the others.

Anger and despair contended in Barry's mind. They would be too late. The heavy cables sprawled into the black water like great snakes, lifeless in appearance, but he knew the torturing forces with which

they were filling the slough. And he alone of all the colony knew the full horror of the torvaks.

Through the mist he could just see the building where Nick had set up the switchboard, and he hoped he would be watching for orders. Otherwise—

With deceptive calm he walked to one of the flame throwers, snapped the latch releasing the bulky mechanism from its tripod, picked it up in both arms.

"What are you doing?" Captain Stanley demanded.

"I'm going in," Barry declared.

The watching men were too dumfounded to stop him as he ran downstream.

Through the mist he saw something move just below the surface. A Venusian woman, her muscles twitching in spastic convulsions as the electric current ripped at her nerves. And then a few yards away a shadow, misshapen and unbelievably huge.

Barry stopped, cradling the heavy flame thrower in his arms.

"Turn off that current!" he pleaded once again.

Without waiting for an answer he leaped.

The weight of the weapon took him instantly to the bottom. He sprawled in the ooze. He had miscalculated. A million fiends were stabbing with red-hot knives, and his muscles twitched and squirmed in insane convulsions. His chest was clamped in a gigantic vise that kept him from filling his lungs with the water that meant life.

But he was still conscious, still able to see the screaming forms of Venusians who, in their flight from the monsters, had ventured too deep into the charged area.

An ugly creature came toward Barry. It was shaking its huge body, but it was coming on nonetheless. Its scaly hide and low-grade nervous system made it at least partially immune to the electrical charge; its killer instincts forced it to disregard the discomfort. Through the reek of decaying vegetation Barry got a whiff of the acrid odor he had learned to identify as fresh blood.

He struggled to raise his flame thrower, but he was unable to coordinate his movements.

And then at the last possible moment the twitchings of his body ceased. Someone,

Captain Stanley or Nick, had pulled the main switch.

He brought the nozzle of the flame thrower around. Flame blossomed and ricocheted through the water in burning globules. Concussion and shock wave threw him face down in the mud, dazzled and deafened.

He picked himself up, gagging and retching at the taint of charred flesh. The creature was still twitching in its death throes, stirring the water to opacity. Through the silt Barry could see several Venusian survivors moving feebly.

"Follow me!" he yelled, fearful that at any instant the current would be turned on again.

Then he went down the slough in great leaping bounds while a howling lust to kill mounted within him. The flame thrower, designed to be used from a fixed mount, made a clumsy burden in his arms. Monsters, dozens of them of all sizes and shapes, had come to kill. They remained to be killed instead.

Time after time the flame thrower sent its blazing cone licking forth. The water grew thick and uncomfortably hot, but little by little he cleared a path to the sea.

Once he looked back. The Venusians were following, and on each face was a look of adoration. Barry knew then he had made himself the new leader of Tana. They crowded close, anxious to get away from the bewitched waters. He motioned them to keep a safe distance.

And then suddenly he reached open water and the last of the monsters died in fire. Barry looked down at the pressure gauges. The tanks were empty.

The Venusians gathered around but kept a respectful distance from his person.

"Get back to Tana, all of you!" he commanded. "Remain there until either Xintel or I tell you otherwise!"

Without further questioning they obeyed.

HE WOULD have missed the half submerged tree entirely except for something white on the bottom, something from which small carrion-eaters scuttled at his

approach. Hind's skeleton, already half buried in the ooze. Gunshot or drowning? Dorothy or Xintel? What matter?

The two women were still watching each other warily on the bank. But, he saw with relief, they had laid their weapons aside.

Together, each in her own language, they bombarded him with questions.

He managed a faint smile although the skin of his face felt stiff and scorched from the flame thrower's heat.

"No war," he said.

That should have finished it, and all he wanted now was rest.

But again they spoke at once. Their languages were different but their meanings were the same.

"Barry, I want to talk to her."

Wearily he slumped down, nodding.

But as the conversation progressed he fidgeted uneasily. With the amazing frankness of two strong-willed females, they were settling his future while he translated. It was like a distorted dream.

They finally reached an agreement. Neither liked it entirely, but both were unselfish enough to consider Barry's welfare. And both were realists.

Barry blinked and blushed as he translated, but could not suppress a feeling of relief.

"I really don't mind—too much," Dorothy addressed him directly. "But if you ever tell anyone up here you're still carrying on with this bare breasted fish-girl I swear you'll be sorry."

Xintel spoke. "I understand. She is of your own people. But please, Barry, those of Tana do not need to know."

Dorothy and Xintel were watching him, waiting for his answer.

Two women in his life, both determined to remain. Either they would resent each other, and through jealousy, make his life hell, or they would become firm friends. He could easily become the most henpecked man on all Venus. But to choose between them—

Well, boredom was one thing he need never fear.

He nodded.

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

And in leaving I would say one thing to you, dear Jack, DON'T CHANGE PLANET! Except for putting in more columns.

Sincerely,

DON WEGARS

BERRIED!

South Byron,
Wisconsin

Dear Editor,

Received my January Planet today, and to say that I am amazed at the reaction to my letter in September Planet, is putting it mildly. I feel like the hen who lost one feather, and after the story circled the barnyard, returning to her, she did not recognize herself, for she had lost all her feathers. Did I make so many people angry that they didn't even read paragraph two?

I was trying to say that just because one person, or more, as the case seemed to be over poor Bryan Berry, does not like a certain story, this should not infer that everyone else feels the same way.

I did not say one has no right to criticize. I did say I was tired of the hub-bub over pictures and stories by certain artists and writers, by people who, perhaps, never wrote a story or drew a picture. (NOTE: I do not say that all of you haven't; I say SOME.)

J. Dean Clark has stated my idea exactly—pulp magazines are not meant to be masterpieces of art or literature; they are meant for reading pleasure, so why all the controversy over Berry? If you don't like the story, why read it? I am of the opinion that all of the readers of PLANET read it from cover to cover, regardless of the authors and artists, even as I.

Many of my friends think I am foolish because I read science fiction. But as long as I like it, I read it. I don't try to choose their reading matter. I, for one, do not care for modernistic paintings. I want my pictures about things as I actually see them. However, I don't expect other people not to like them if their taste runs that way.

Val Walker's remarks insinuate that I put myself above some of the readers in intelligence and ability. This interpretation is fallacy. Were I as flourishing a writer as Val seems to sarcastically imply, I would not need to belong to a Writers' Club. I did not mean to intimate that any letters and opinions expressed were not intelligent. I merely tried to say that I thought too much fuss was being made over material the fans did not like.

Because some people thought that Bryan Berry's stories in a few of the issues were not up to standard set by other writers, the knives were out. Any writer knows (even amateurs like me) that the brain child they dream of often turns out like human children—little monsters—when they try to get it down on paper, and even if it is only a dream child, it can get cantankerous, ornery, stubborn, or just plain dumb at times, and a lot of rewriting may only make it worse. So the author says, as many a parent of their erring children, "All right, so I didn't do very well with this one; I'll handle the next one differently." Many an excellent cook has had a fallen cake sometime or other.

My whole letter really revolved around the problem of Mr. Berry and what the readers were doing to him, and I, ever a champion of the underdog, had to stick my neck out. All right! I hereby withdraw.

Blast him, burn him, throw him to the wolves! You will anyhow. If most of you who criticized him, read his stories with the same type of interpretation that you did my letter, I see why you wrote as you did. Mr. Berry, I leave you to your fate! You'll have to find a new champion. May the editors be kind and the critics merciful! Sorry I ever entered this rat race!

Woefully,

EVELYN MCLEAN

FREAS UNFATHOMED

63 Glenridge Ave.
St. Catharines, Ont.

Dear Jack,

Freas, (with apologies to Anderson) is, I remember, the artist who rendered the September cover for PS. Thanks for reminding me, Jack. I expected something of the sort when I perused the November ish and discovered to my chagrin that Kelly Freas was responsible for that masterpiece.

Which doesn't mean that artist Freas can do no wrong, as I think I observed in that letter, since you probably have a stockpile of future covers to go through. But if the lovely job on the January PLANET can mean anything, it would be that Mr. Freas certainly has talent as yet unfathomed. The main conclusion that I've come to is that if he takes more time on his work, it wouldn't be as hacked as the cover for November or the illlo for the CRYSTAL CRYPT.

I suppose I'll have to agree with you that not all good letters are confined to the front pages of La Vizi, Jack, if only because you printed mine on the back page! (Grrrrrrr) Howm'eva, any fen having the patience, endurance, and perseverance to plow through my offering must have pounced with glee upon my own self-condemnation of letters appearing on the back-page . . . how many half-starved letterhacks will redeem their Underwoods from the pawnshops to write in about that?

Story content this was on the most part very good. We even have two big names on PLANET's front cover, eh? Nothing like a dose of that to pep up a magazine's circulatory disease.

Let me say I, my humble self, think that Brackett wrote too much on MARS MINUS BISHA . . . the essential idea was very commendable, but I didn't care for the way it was handled, nor the way the secret of Bisha's mental dependence was mentioned in only a passing way. I'm sure her fans would have preferred more action to the story, let's hope she comes through with something better.

When it comes to science-fiction, I have a strong preference, not towards the action or mystic story, but the alien psychology or alien chemistry and zoology. FELINE R1D was not a particular good story, but I did like the idea of those energy creatures, and would appreciate more of the same. One of science-fiction's great attractions is its ability to create any life-form or planet conditions it wants.

Paul's letter this January must have endeared him to the hearts of all Brackett fans and exiled him from those who don't like her. He ought to take over Fitzpatrick's job of sailing into the setting suns/set (not a typo, but a binary). And you, Jack O'Sullivan, I suspect of seeking to start another controversy in the now serene and slumbering volcano of La Vizi by placing Mr. Clark's letter at the column's head.

I refuse to bite, outside of the observation that his coy way of closing his letter made an adverse impression on me.

As to giving out letters, let me say I give first

place to Paul Mittelbuscher, second Chris Christoff for his superbly ridiculous letter, and the burdensome task of making three selections in triplicate to J. Dean Clark. There, and suffer.

I can't think of anything more enlightening to scribe into this three-foot long roll of parchment I've sent you, Jack, so signing my name in untranslatable (that's a word?) Cretan cuneiform . . . or would you prefer something extraterrestrial?

Yours for a Mercurian day,
JOE KEOGH

A BRACKETTEER

377 East 1st North
Provo, Utah

Dear Jack:

So you did it again! Brackett's tale of the Martian deserts, with their very believable inhabitants, was the best in the mag—just as you'd planned, no doubt. Too bad you can't get a story from her every time; many persons feel that she is the one who made PLANET the favorite it is, with her many tales of vivid adventure on the red planet and elsewhere, and the characters which made them live for awhile. Somebody said that you think of Mars and Bradbury synonymously, but did they ever say the same about Brackett? She certainly deserves the same honor, if not an even higher one. Many are they who don't care much for Bradbury's yarns, but has anyone ever made thoroughly derogatory remarks about Brackett's?

I was at this point going to point out a bad slip in the contents' page, but decided that you'll get so many letters anyway jumping down your throat about leaving out a whole title and blurb that I would spare you the trouble of adding mine to the list. Besides, it wasn't a very good story anyway for Planet, though it would have graced a fanzine's pages nicely.

Letters:

1. Fred Christoff
2. Paul Mittelbuscher
3. Claude Hall

For once Bradbury had a good yarn, A SOUND OF THUNDER; even rated second. Though I'd already read it when it appeared in COLLIER'S, I skimmed through again and decided it was very much ok for you to re-run it. After all, there probably weren't many who'd read it in its original incarnation!

Claude Hall: Afraid I must disagree with you, though it is a minor item. You said that a person who enters the golden ranks of fandom via a certain mag, such as AMAZING STORIES, will always remain true to it. And I suppose you mean that it will remain their favorite above all others? Oh my—huh uh! Very definitely negative! For instance, since you mentioned AMAZING, I'll confide that the January 1949 ish (portraying a caveman fighting a dinosaur, by J. Allen St. John) was the first stf mag I ever read, or laid eyes on. Since I'd already combed the libraries for prehistoric and Burroughs' novels, not dreaming that such literature as stf existed, this cover was a natural attractor!

In one aspect you are right—I do have a soft spot in my heart for AMAZING, but only that one particular ish, and perhaps a few other outstanding ones of AS and FA, before 1952! When they became digest-sized they immediately lost all their distinctive stories and interesting departments and something else most important of all,—call it mood, or just the feeling you have when you first see a new ish of your favorite stf mag.

Now, AS and FA are down at the bottom of the heap, at least as far as I'm concerned and PLANET is still holding one of the top places it acquired soon

after I discovered it in the form of numerous back ishs, early in 1949. Perhaps it would lose the essence that makes it PLANET were it to go digest size, and perhaps not. Let's not take a chance of finding out! Long live the pulps!!!

But it would be nice to have a new department reviewing the fanzines. Anyone else agree? (Those who don't—shaddup!—you can always look the other way as you skip over those pages . . .)

OK, Jack, remember now you promised that when 1000 fen send me their lists of 10 favorite stf mags you'd print the results in La Vizi!!! If everyone reading this right now would do so, these results would probably see print in the September ish, probably. So come on, YOU! If you haven't already done so, put 'em down on a postcard even. Send them along, quick! Right now as I'm writing this it's early December and already over 200 have responded. If you'll do so now as you read this, it will probably make the 1000 mark easy, and perhaps even over it. SO HURRY!

Jack—you're a sly one, or maybe you did it very intentionally on purpose . . . ! Joe Keogh accuses you of putting those letters on the back page written by "neophytes and fanatics." So guess where his letter appears? Hmmmmm.

Do we get more Brackett soon???

Stfly,

CAROL MCKINNEY

Ed's note: Yes, we are expecting more yarns from Leigh Brackett. And when we get 'em, you can bet that PLANET readers will be the first to see 'em—after me.

WATCHER OF THE WORDS

2543 Wabash Ave.
L. A. 33, Calif.

Hi-Ya, Ed,

I am an old foggy—and that is neither excuse nor apology. Also, I am one of the watchers of the world, who would rather stand on a street corner and observe the rat-race called humanity than to spend time in a movie or sit and look at television. Many times, in the course of a long and mis-spent life, I have seen a slip of a girl take a shine to some nice young fellow and get him to chase her until she got ready to catch him, then proceed to dig, prod, pinch, pull and nag him until his ideas, habits and character were so altered that you would never know that he was the kid you went to school and grew up with.

Why did she have to choose him, if her ideal was the pompous, stuffed shirt which she eventually made of him?

It's not the creative instinct, for these characters pull down a darn sight more than they build up.

This is just a preamble to my real gripe, for I find that this penchant for change is not now confined to the female of the species.

I cut my teeth on Science-Fiction and Fantasy in 1893 and have never been weaned. My shelves are overflowing with every SF & F mag that is printed in the U.S.A., as well as all the contemporary pocket books. I have, in my collection, a few copies of Planet Stories, (Vol. I, No. 1—to Vol. 6—No. 4—Inclus.), and I love every one of them.

It would make no difference to me if the covers were by Watteau and the edges were trimmed with dull shears, as long as the same high-class stuffing was inside. I have consumed a lot of roast Turkey in my life, but have never tried to extract nourishment from the feathers.

If these young Falcons must have digest-size, slick paper, machined edges and Forget-me-nots on the

cover, let them go to any High School Stationery store and buy some of those note-size writing tablets. They'd evidently get as much enjoyment out of looking at the picture and feeling the nice smooth edges as they seem to be in need of.

Wouldn't they have had a heck of a time with our dime novels of the 90's, (11x17), that we had to go into hiding with, in order to read them, or hold them behind our oversized geographies to avoid having teacher take them away from us? I lost many of them, that way.

End of gripe.

Stay with it, O'Sullivan, me bye; keep on giving us the same good old baloney that Malcolm Reiss started on the 1st of November 1939 and let the youngsters fight over the skin. I'll buy every mag put out under the P.S. masthead, regardless of size, shape or color.

Sincerely,

EDW. L. MORTON

WHICH IS WORSE?

347 Oak Road
Glenside,
Pennsylvania

Dear Editor;

J. Dean Clark put up a great fight for sex in the January issue.

In several points I agree with him. Where he says sex is ugly only to the neurotic mind, what kind of sex does he mean. You can put a girl in a space suit, September issue, or have her completely bared to nature. Sex is present in both cases.

To the neurotic it would make hardly any difference in the least bit. To the censors . . . Yes.

In just about every STF mag on the stands there is a controversy about sex going on. All except a few "STF" mags that are "lily white." Mags that are lily white are just turning their backs on sex, and like the head-burying ostrich, fooling themselves into thinking they can ignore it.

When you go to the movies you sometimes see young women displaying their capabilities clad only in very small bathing suits, or dresses cut just right. But you never see (the censors wouldn't like it) them prancing about like innocent Eve.

Which is worse? Suggestion or truth?

To leave the discussion of sex I would like to speak in Frank Kelly Freas' behalf.

Freas is a terrific artist (as PLANET fan know) and I predict that he will become as popular, and possibly more popular than, Virgil Finlay.

While Finlay does black and whites only, Freas does both color and B. and W. illos.

Freas makes his drawings clear-cut. Finlay uses thousands of tiny lines to achieve his effect.

The only question I have concerning Freas is, where can I buy one of his cover paintings?

I had quite a laugh over (excuse me, Joe) Keogh. In the body of his letter he stated, (I quote) "The back page is left for neophytes and fanatics." The guffaw came from the fact that his letter was printed on the back page.

What, I say watt is so confounded putrid about Bryan Berry? If he likes RB's style, let him use it. Or does RB have a patent or copyright on it? Personally I can't see what harm it does.

What I would like to see is a plug on the contents page for the cover artist and for the interior work. And also a fannish column. That would top it off.

Possibly the most fascinating cover on planet yet is the January cover by FKF. That's a real crazy ship in the background.

For letters I pick; 1) Paul Mittelbuscher, for his

appreciation of Brackett, 2) Val Walker, (I enter my vote for a fan column), 3) Frederick B. Christoff, because he is a friend of Val Walker, and I agree with Val on fan columns.

Xnaht rof tenalP

JOHN G. FLETCHER

A QUESTION OF FIGURES

946 Cedar
Casper, Wyoming

Gentlemen:

Could you tell me what the hell Bradbury is trying to push down our throats? In PLANET STORIES for November 1953 he stated flatly that the inside temperature of the space ship was 1,000 degrees below zero. Since he is not scientific enough to use the Centigrade scale, and I am not a walking encyclopaedia and do not know the temperature of absolute zero in the Fahrenheit system, I used the formula:

$$C = 5/9 (F - 32)$$

$$\text{Substituting: } C = 5/9 (-1000 - 32)$$

$$= 5/9 (-1032)$$

$$= -577.7^{\circ} C.$$

I do know, however, that absolute zero on the Centigrade scale is -273 . Would you tell me pray, does Bradbury know (or for the sake of the story, even surmise) how to get on the minus side of absolute zero?

This seems to be somewhat a question of degrees.

Sincerely yours,

CHAS. R. PETERSON

Ed's note: Being an old sub-tropics man myself, I'll gladly leave this question to more northerly neighbors.

ON LIFE AND LOVE

811 N. Milpas
Santa Barbara
California

Dear Ed,

Isn't it about time you heard from eloquent me, though? Yes, sir, I have been a busy little bumble bee this summer. I enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve and spent a few leisurely (gag) weeks on active duty. No longer am I a callow youth. I feel that I have come to grips with life. I am wise and calculating. I have a lightning wit. Yes—I am a college boy this year. At last someone appreciates lovable me. I have decided not to deprive humanity of my benevolent, philosophical wisdom. They shall and are discovering what a warm, lovable, cuddly individual I really am. I am just like a li'l teddy bear—with a crew hair cut.

You realize, of course that I couldn't write all this garbage about myself if it weren't really so, don't you? Well, don't you? Welllllllll, it does bolster my ego.

Tell me old man, let us have the straight poop from the group here. Do you figure on a letter column in this new mag of yours, TOPS IN SCIENCE FICTION? Do you (chuckle) plan to (chortle) give away any (drool) original (smack) illustrations?

I read—yes, I can read, although the pictures were very (wheeze) pretty—LORELI OF THE RED MIST, and I can only say that this collaboration of Bradbury and Brackett produces the most descriptive, vivid, deliciously human story I have read in a long time. Such fine and sometimes violent shades of emotion as are presented here in words on paper are hard to realize and recognize, much less faithfully reproduce, woven around such a praiseworthy, exquisite plot.

I realize that I may sound like a slobbering, jabbering idiot when I say this, but I still have more to jabber. People, especially writers, today seem to find it so hard to recognize people, their drives and emotions as they really are. They cannot let themselves go in their work and present the human animal in his true, unvarnished, natural existence.

People are hidebound and inhibited. They don't say guts, they say intestinal fortitude. They regard sex as a vice, not a natural, emotional reaction. I could go on all night, but what I'm getting at is that people in general don't want to admit that they're people. They don't realize the fun they could have from life if they did admit they were people. People don't seem to love life, they just regard it as a means to an end. Nine times out of ten they don't enjoy marriage, they just do it because everyone does and it's the accepted thing to do.

Now take this Starke individual—he loves living. He is willing to inhabit a strange body to continue living. How many of us would quail at the thought? Not many of us happy, dancing, broad-minded stuff addicts would, but the average person would be terrified at such a thought. Starke falls in love with Beudag, Dagger-in-the-Sheath, but you'll notice that it's not the modern, cocktail party, white formal dinner dress, perfumed, necessary kind of love. It's natural. Shall we say, it's not a twin bed affair.

They are entirely in love, head to toe. This is natural. Some people are too sedate to admit it, but love is almost entirely physical.

People are hidebound and stuffy, I guess. And it's so disconnected that it becomes hard to follow, but you get the idea. To reiterate what I've said so often before, it's a fine generation that is maturing now. They are uninhibited. They are broadminded. They are alive. They love life, and, after all, that is what goes to make the individual who is perfectly satisfied with himself and with those about him.

If you draw anything from this garbled mass, mayhap the rest of the chortling, drooling fans would like my brilliant observations of life, love, and the younger generation. What I'm hinting at, of course, is that you print my letter, for this is the age of the new Tuning, who has been mellowed and seasoned by both the temporal and material aspects of the world. Gad, I'm beginning to feel like an old man.

UNCLE BILL TUNING

The Sagacious Solomon of Santa Barbara

Ed's note: I regret to report that TOPS IN SCIENCE FICTION has temporarily discontinued publication.

FAST IN THE STRETCH

2022½ Terry
Seattle 1, Wash.

Dear Ed;

This is my first critic script, and I would like to know why, in your January issue, you placed A SOUND OF THUNDER first? I almost did not bother finishing the magazine. If you had traded places with NARAKAN RIFLES, ABOUT FACE, it would have been different.

Leigh Brackett's MARS MINUS BISHA was an excellent and very human story. A Pink Lady's Slipper for her, an orchid she must resemble.

B-12's MOON GLOW might fit our overseas neighbors, from which the idea must have been born. THE CRYSTAL CRYPT is my kind of story and well written although the ending was long foreseen. The remaining stories were fair but common with no lasting effect.

You could use a good condensed science article. I usually look for one of these.

I'm sorry I cannot place PLANET in first place on my hit parade; it must fight for third with ASTOUNDING. However I must confess that I have only read this one issue of P.S. IF is my first choice and GALAXY, 'the old man from Boston,' is second.

Oh yes, I finally discovered where totem poles come from.

Till I can go to Mercury,
M. L. DE VORE

LOYALTY

1038 Garden Street
Palo Alto, Calif.

Dear Editor;

In my opinion the best of the stories appearing in the January issue is GEORGE LOVES GISTLA by James McKimney, Jr.

Faithfully,
MRS. JAMES MCKIMNEY, JR.

POET PAUL

260 Wellington St. E.
Sault Ste. Marie,
Ontario, Canada

Dear Editor;

One of the first things I noticed in your January PLANET was the letter from Paul Mittelbuscher. Even had the stories not been good—and they are—the magazine is worth keeping just for the word-pictures in this one letter.

Also, where the dickens did Paul get the idea, and I quote "what I've said, I've said very poorly. I wasn't gifted with a poet's soul." I say he wasn't gifted with a poet's soul; he was born with one, even if he doesn't know it. This "poor eulogy" of his is a brilliant description of the basic atmosphere behind all of Leigh Brackett's best stories.

If this letter doesn't walk off with the first prize something is very wrong with your basis of selection. And urge him, if you can, to write some stories. If you can get anything out of him that's anything like that letter—oh brother!

Yours truly,
ONTHEA PLATT

RECORD BREAKER

1260 Loyola Avenue
Chicago 26, Ill.

Dear Editor;

I do not usually go for pulpzines, and it is very seldom that I write to them. However, I must write and report that PLANET for January was very good. I just want to say that there was not one story in that issue that I disliked. For me, this is indeed a record.

Of course, I liked them in varying degrees of affection. First and foremost was MARS MINUS BISHA by Leigh Brackett.

Encore.

A close second was Bradbury's A SOUND OF THUNDER. Next in order, 3) NARAKAN RIFLES, ABOUT FACE: 4) GEORGE LOVES GISTLA: 5) WOMAN-STEALERS OF THRAXX; 6) B-12's MOON GLOW; 7) FELINE RED; 8) THE CRYSTAL CRYPT.

The last I liked least because the ending was so predictable, but I still liked it. Well, I've broken it to you gently. Now, on to the critical part of this epistle. a) trim your pages; b) what was that cover

supposed to be? All I could see was a woman, beams and some yellow circles. This is art? c) will you please try to get some variety into your letter columns? The same people keep coming up and coming up over and over again. d) why don't you cut that letter section and add some decent features, like an editorial? I, at least, likes to know what the editor thinks. e) oops, sorry. I just found what I suppose is an editorial—one paragraph tucked away in a corner.

'at's all,

VAL LANGHAM

CHOICE-LESS

38 Blendworth Crescent
Leigh Park
Havant, Hants

(Was 163 Devonshire Ave.)

Dear Sir,

With great pleasure I note my name in your November picture winners list; hence this letter. Also I owe you a debt of gratitude for publishing my first letter. Through doing so you have put me in touch with many other S.F. fans, and have also enabled me to get regular copies of your magazine. Thank you very much.

Yours sincerely,

A. K. KING

Ed's note: If you will make known your choice of picture, Mr. King, I'll be very happy to send it along.

FROM COVER TO COVER

3398th Stu Sqdn
Keesler AFB,
Biloxi, Mississippi

Dear Jack;

On reflection I fear that I was perhaps guilty of going off the deep end in my praise of Leigh Brackett. As friend Keogh has pointed out to me she is not without faults as a writer. Let me say here and now that I recognize and appreciate this fact. I certainly wouldn't want anyone to get the impression that I'm one of the "blind worshipers" who are unable to view with detachment and afford a work the critical analyses it deserves. Admitting that my conclusions would be touched with some prejudice I still maintain I am able to judge an individual piece of fiction on its own merits and do not allow the authors byline to take preference over my actual opinion. I certainly have not and DO NOT maintain that Brackett hasn't written some poor stories. This is true of Bradbury, Kuttner, Van Vogt or . . . HEMINGWAY. The mere fact is that I was attempting to point out that Brackett has written some entertaining and vastly interesting stories from MY viewpoint, that they are not of lasting literary merit is clear. This does not mean that they are worthless.

It is about time that someone spoke up to plead the cause of old PS, it seems to me that some of the

scornful snobs who sneer at PLANET do so primarily because it is the "thing" to do these days. Space opera has become synonymous with bad writing. This is unjustified and absurd but nevertheless a commonly accepted dogma. What really amuses me is that when asked, these violent critics often admit that the fact PS is a pulp has much to do with it, and when further questioned admit (with a straight face, no less) that IMAGINATION is their favorite magazine. This then is a mature mag??? It would be hilarious if it wasn't so pathetic.

A brief rundown of the fictional contents for PS January 1954: Neither Smith's or Sampson's efforts were worthy of comment. Stearn's short concerning the Robot-moonshiner was one of those that place me in an embarrassing position. You see it is my belief that HUMOR has no place in Science Fiction. Regrettably however I must confess I enjoyed this thing. Dick almost had a good story in CRYSTAL CRYPT, it was ruined by too many coincidences, illogical actions (on the part of the "saboteurs") and a telegraphed ending.

McKimmy entered another strong plea for racial tolerance with GEORGE LOVES GISTLA, employing something of a "Bradburian" atmosphere. Brackett and Bradbury were both not up to their usual peak of fictional perfection but nevertheless well worth reading. Ray blundered by having his central character (Eckels) make a longwinded declaration of fear at the sight of Tyrannosaurus Rex. Persons as terrified as Eckels was supposed to have been do not make speeches at such moments . . . in fact they're hardly capable of coherent thought.

A true sense of tragedy was present in MARS MINUS BISHA. Only a person vastly indifferent to human misery would not have been affected by this yarn. Holden's novella, taken for what it was, was extremely readable, no great Cosmic Concepts, no taboos shattered, and it will never be anthologized but I was entertained by it which is I feel enough. Personally I don't believe it's necessary to have a revolutionary idea in each and every story, certainly there was nothing to patent in WOMAN STEALERS.

What distressed me however about this particular issue was the absence of VESTAL from your pages. Planet just isn't Planet without H. B., ESMH is (with apologies to Keogh) unsuitable for your magazine.

Best letters were (1) J. Dean Clark; (2) Joe Keogh; (3) Claude Hall. I'm afraid I can't agree with Christoff, the "lousey stories" tag indicates illogical reasoning. Concerning the fact that "Everything in STF has changed but PS" . . . well Fred do you consider the changes healthy ones . . . I don't, true Stf is a bit more mature but for the small advancement we've paid heavily. We now have a lot of "Woman's Home Companion's" in disguise. Watered down completely WORTHLESS crud . . . "away, away with ye foul stench." As Marion Bradley says we now have Science Fiction of a "sort" . . . sadly true.

Sincerely,

A/3c PAUL MITTELBUSCHER

Under His Foot, the Live Grenade

Technical Sergeant
Robert S. Kennemore, USMC
Medal of Honor



THE MACHINE GUN belonged to E Company, Second Battalion, Seventh Marines. It was under the command of Technical Sergeant Robert Sidney Kennemore.

It was busy. For on this November night fanatical Red masses were swamping Marine defense positions north of Yudam-ni.

Fifteen yards in front of the gun, a Red soldier raised his body briefly and sent a grenade into the air. It landed squarely among the crew. In a split second, Sergeant Kennemore had covered it with his foot.

There was a violent, muffled explosion, but not a man was hurt. Not a man except Sergeant Kennemore. He had given both his legs to save his comrades' lives.

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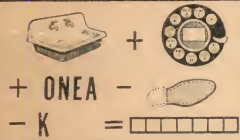
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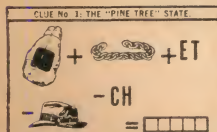
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